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FROM COLONIALISM TO CONTAINMENT:
WHY AMERICAN FORCES DID NOT INTERVENE AT DIEN BIEN PHU
(252 pages)

by
JONATHAN EDWARD FAIR, CAPT, USAF

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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APPROVED BY:

Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

FAIR, JONATHAN EDWARD. From Colonialism to Containment: Why American Forces Did Not Intervene at Dien Bien Phu. (Under the direction of Drs. Joseph Caddell, Joseph Hobbs, and Nancy Mitchell.)

This thesis examines two conflicting ideas during the Franco-Indochinese war of 1946-1954. On the one hand was the issue of colonialism. Because of historical precedent, the United States could not openly support the colonial aspirations of the French empire. On the other was the problem of containment. Ho Chi Minh was a communist, and any form of communist infiltration into Southeast Asia had to be stopped. The interplay of these two concepts greatly influenced the Eisenhower administration's decision not to intervene in the French struggle at Dien Bien Phu.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the country of Vietnam became a colony of the French empire. The French brought economic progress to the region. However, they stifled the political growth of the Vietnamese. The indigenous people attempted several revolts, but they were quelled by the French. After French capitulation to the Nazis in 1940, Vietnam became a possession of Japan.

After World War II, France tried to reclaim Vietnam as a colony within the French Union. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, a revolutionary with both nationalist and communist aspirations, the Vietminh began a war of independence in

December 1946. Ho Chi Minh appealed to the United States for assistance, but for four years, America maintained an official position of neutrality but favored the French.

Following the "loss of China" to the communists and the explosion of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union, the United States formally declared its support for the French. And after the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the United States linked the two conflicts to a global effort to curb the spread of international communism.

Despite U.S. assistance, the French were unable to defeat the Vietminh. In 1953, the new French commander, General Henri Navarre, formulated a plan to conquer the Vietminh by the end of 1955. Included in that plan was the establishment of an outpost deep in enemy territory. His objective was to draw the enemy into the open where the military-superior soldiers could annihilate them.

American officials had reservations regarding the probability of success of the Navarre plan. However, it was not until the Vietminh began to overwhelm the French garrison in the Spring of 1954 that the United States started debating what options existed to help their ally. One plan, codenamed Operation Vulture, called for an attack by hundreds of U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft near the fort. The other, termed United Action, called for multi-national intervention into the fight by American and British soldiers.

The problem with any intervention plan was that the United States did not want to look as though it was supporting

a colonial power fighting a nationalist movement. However, America needed to support a Cold War ally in their struggle against a communist enemy. In the end, the United States did not intervene, the French lost the fight at Dien Bien Phu, and the Geneva conference divided Vietnam into two sectors.

After Geneva, United Action, a plan for intervention, became the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, a multinational security pact for the region. After the French left Vietnam, the taint of colonialism left with them. What remained was a Cold War campaign which, in the 1960s, required the intervention of U.S. combat troops assisting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

This paper will chart the interplay of the concepts of colonialism and containment and analyze their influence on the decision-making process of President Eisenhower during 1954.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines two conflicting ideas during the Franco-Indochinese war of 1946-1954. On the one hand was the issue of colonialism. Because of historical precedent, the United States could not openly support the colonial aspirations of the French empire. On the other was the problem of containment. Ho Chi Minh was a communist, and any form of communist infiltration into Southeast Asia had to be stopped. The interplay of these two concepts greatly influenced the Eisenhower administration's decision not to intervene in the French struggle at Dien Bien Phu.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the country of Vietnam became a colony of the French empire. The French brought economic progress to the region. However, they stifled the political growth of the Vietnamese. The indigenous people attempted several revolts, but they were quelled by the French. After French capitulation to the Nazis in 1940, Vietnam became a possession of Japan.

After World War II, France tried to reclaim Vietnam as a colony within the French Union. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, a revolutionary with both nationalist and communist aspirations, the Vietminh began a war of independence in

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Following the "loss of China" to the communists and the explosion of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union, the United States formally declared its support for the French. And after the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the United States linked the two conflicts to a global effort to curb the spread of international communism.

Despite U.S. assistance, the French were unable to defeat the Vietminh. In 1953, the new French commander, General Henri Navarre, formulated a plan to conquer the Vietminh by the end of 1955. Included in that plan was the establishment of an outpost deep in enemy territory. His objective was to draw the enemy into the open where the military-superior soldiers could annihilate them.

American officials had reservations regarding the probability of success of the Navarre plan. However, it was not until the Vietminh began to overwhelm the French garrison in the Spring of 1954 that the United States started debating what options existed to help their ally. One plan, codenamed Operation Vulture, called for an attack by hundreds of U.S. Air Force and Navy aircraft near the fort. The other, termed United Action, called for multi-national intervention into the fight by American and British soldiers.

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After Geneva, United Action, a plan for intervention, became the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, a multinational security pact for the region. After the French left Vietnam, the taint of colonialism left with them. What remained was a Cold War campaign which, in the 1960s, required the intervention of U.S. combat troops assisting the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

This paper will chart the interplay of the concepts of colonialism and containment and analyze their influence on the decision-making process of President Eisenhower during 1954.

FROM COLONIALISM TO CONTAINMENT:
WHY AMERICAN FORCES DID NOT INTERVENE AT DIEN BIEN PHU

by

JONATHAN EDWARD FAIR

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Arts

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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1996

APPROVED BY:

Co-Chairs of Advisory Committee

BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Edward Fair (b. 1965) grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Muhlenberg High School in 1983, and the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado as a Second Lieutenant in May 1987. He completed Undergraduate Controller Training at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida in September 1987, Automated Weapons Controller Training at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona in November 1987, and Initial Controller Training for the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma in July 1988. He was a crewmember onboard the E-3A Sentry AWACS from August 1988 to July 1994, serving in the positions of Weapons Director and Senior Director, as well as a Wing Standardization/Evaluation Flight Examiner and the Squadron Weapons Training Officer. Through the Air Force Institute of Technology, he attended North Carolina State University from August 1994 through May 1996. He is presently assigned to the Air Force Academy as an Associate Professor in the Department of Military Arts and Sciences.

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How many times in my life I've been asked: you who know Ho Chi Minh so well, can you say whether he is a nationalist or a communist? The answer is simple: Ho Chi Minh is both. For him, nationalism and communism, the end and the means, complement one another: or rather, they merge inextricably.

Tran Ngoc Danh,
Compatriot of Ho Chi Minh

I have been asked countless times, "Was Ho Chi Minh primarily a Nationalist or a Communist?" My reply is always the same: Ho Chi Minh was both. For him nationalism and communism were, respectively, goal and the means to attain that goal. The two complemented each other, merged.

Jean Sainteny
French Envoy to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1946

Re Deal With French: You Are Misunderstanding Vietminh
Attitude They Not Anti-French Merely Patriots Deserve Full
Trust And Support

AGAS Officer Phelan
Message to American Headquarters in China, 1945

Introduction

During an April 1995 interview after the release of Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, Newsweek journalist Jonathan Alter asked the former United States Defense Secretary, "What are the two or three most important lessons of Vietnam?" McNamara responded:

Put very simply: don't misjudge the nature of the conflict. Don't underestimate the power of ***nationalism***. Many conflicts of the future will be about nationalism. Don't overestimate what outside military forces can accomplish. . . . And don't ***act unilaterally*** unless the security of our country is directly threatened.¹(emphasis added)
by whom?

In his book, McNamara admitted that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations did not understand the nature of the conflict in Southeast Asia and that the United States "totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh's movement." When deciding on the correct course of action to deal with the crisis, McNamara recalled, "We failed to ask the most basic questions: Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West's security. . . .?" Because of this failure to assess the situation correctly, President Lyndon Johnson decided that "the loss of South Vietnam had a higher cost than would the direct application of U.S. military force." In 1965 he

ordered the initiation of "Operation Rolling Thunder," the Air Force bombing campaign against North Vietnam. He also raised the commitment of United States ground troops in the region from 23,000 to 175,000. This number would increase to almost 300,000 in 1966 and over 500,000 by 1968. According to McNamara, Johnson committed these American soldiers because of an "exaggerated fear" about the situation and its relevance to the national security interests of the United States.²

McNamara failed to mention that other presidential administrations had also encountered the same dilemma of how to resolve the crisis in Southeast Asia. These previous presidents had placed no less importance on the region. And yet, they somehow managed to keep the commitment of American forces to the area to a few hundred technicians and advisors. John Fitzgerald Kennedy's immediate predecessor, Dwight David Eisenhower, faced a predicament that almost necessitated the deployment of United States soldiers to Vietnam. He could have resolved the situation "by other means," to quote the nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote that "war is a continuation of political activity by other means." Instead, he opted for a solution that entailed sending only a small number of American soldiers to that volatile region.³

The predicament that Eisenhower faced occurred in the

spring of 1954 when the French faced a dire military situation in their colony of Indochina. A large contingent of French Union troops found themselves in a remote redoubt pinned down by an overwhelming number of Vietminh regulars. Eight long years of combatting the Vietnamese insurgents had exhausted the French militarily, politically, and financially. The Vietnamese, led by Ho Chi Minh, fought for their independence. The French did not want to lose the jewel of their empire. In desperation, the French turned to their Cold War ally, the United States, for increased financial aid and possible military intervention.⁴

Eisenhower posed this French dilemma to his National Security Council advisors. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles favored the use of diplomatic channels to find a peaceful and multi-national solution to the crisis. The plan, labelled "United Action," involved the incorporation of several nations into a regional defense agreement. He believed that the threat of intervention by this coalition would be enough to deter overt communist aggression into the area. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Arthur Radford proposed using U.S. bombers to end the crisis militarily. Radford called the plan "Operation Vulture."

Eisenhower, well aware of the colonial motives of the French and the public sentiment of post-Korean-War America, would opt not to send troops to the region unilaterally. However, in keeping with the United States policy of

containment, the President also believed in the importance of the region to the security of the "free world." He stressed this point several times during speeches delivered in 1953 and 1954. He did not want to let this region fall into the grasp of the communists and have the American people blame the Republicans for "losing Vietnam" as they had blamed the Democrats for "losing China." However, the crisis had Cold War implications that would be felt in Europe as well as in Asia. If he did not assist the French in Indochina, they may refuse to ratify the European Defense Community proposal. Therefore, Eisenhower could not ignore the pleas of an ally whose military Eisenhower needed to strengthen Western Europe against the Soviet menace.⁵

Eisenhower's decisions in 1954 reflected all these sentiments. He increased aid to the French. His hopes were that they would, in turn, accord reciprocity in Western Europe with the ratification of the European Defense Community. He sent no more than a few hundred technicians to the region during his tenure as Chief Executive. Furthermore, he saved part of the region from the clutches of communism by strengthening the Diem government in "South" Vietnam. In the fall of that year, the United States formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization whose charter included the threatened use of force should "North" Vietnam, or another outside power, engage in clandestine, subversive activities south of the 17th parallel.

Some may argue that Eisenhower's actions in 1954 merely delayed the inevitable military conflict between the United States and Vietnamese-Communists. In light of this contention, some say that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson merely inherited the results of Eisenhower's inactivity in this strategically-important region. Eisenhower's decisions, however, clearly demonstrate his understanding of both the issues of colonialism and nationalism and how they affected his intense desire to contain the spread of communism into Southeast Asia. He vowed not to let all of Southeast Asia fall into the Soviet sphere of influence. His decisions made in 1954 fulfilled that promise without spilling a great amount of the blood of America's soldiers on Indochinese soil. Eisenhower may have been willing to become militarily involved in the region, but he would not act unilaterally. Other nations had to be agree to do their share in the area as well.

This paper will describe the background as what influenced President Eisenhower's fateful decisions in 1954. It will begin with a brief description of how and why the French became involved in the affairs of the Vietnamese in the nineteenth century. It will then give a background on the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and the impact of the French colonial structure on some of his actions later in life. It will chart Ho Chi Minh's travels through Europe and Asia in the 1920s and 1930s as he formulated his own

personal ideology of the combination of communism and nationalism. This paper will then move to the situation in Indochina during World War II and how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to make the region a trusteeship of the United Nations with the eventual desire of according the Vietnamese independence when they proved they were ready to handle its responsibilities. It will then examine the post-World War II era and the actions by the Americans, the French, and the Vietnamese in order to accomplish their respective desires for the region. And it will study the impact of the break-out of the Korean War in 1950 with the on-going struggle in Indochina.

The paper will then closely scrutinize the ideas of President Eisenhower with regards to the problem. It will examine the motivations of some of his advisors, namely Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Arthur Radford, and why they formulated the ideas they held. It will look at the impact of Congress, McCarthyism, and the American public opinion on any decision that Eisenhower eventually made. It will briefly look at the motivation of the French military commander in Indochina in 1953, General Henri Navarre, and why he chose to accept a set-place battle in the mountains of northwest Vietnam at the remote location of Dien Bien Phu. It will chart the attempts of Secretary Dulles and Admiral Radford to gain backing for their plans of action in

the region. It will look at why the Vietminh militarily defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, and how they achieved diplomatic victory in Geneva two months later. Finally, it will examine the formation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization in September of that same year, and how Eisenhower incorporated ideas for intervention and multi-lateral action during and after the battle at the French fortress.

Two concepts will intertwine during this paper. The first is the idea of nationalism and colonialism and the roles they played in speeches and actions of Ho Chi Minh as well as French and American leaders. The second is the notion of containment and its impact on Eisenhower's decisions. Were they ideas mutually exclusive or inclusive? Secretary McNamara remarked that U.S. leaders did not understand the concept of nationalism and its role in the anti-communist crusade in Vietnam in the 1960s. However, Eisenhower did understand the impact of both of these ideas one decade earlier. It is this comprehension of the nature of the conflict in Southeast Asia and the roles that communism and nationalism played in it that influenced Eisenhower's decision to not become too military involved in the French conflict in Indochina, especially during their battle against the Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu. This paper will show that Eisenhower did understand the Clausewitzian impact of the military and diplomatic influences in the

formulation of any foreign policy decision. But more importantly in this case, the concepts of colonialism and anti-communist containment played a far greater role in the actions taken by the United States Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in the spring and summer months of 1954.

One last thing that must be remembered when reading this paper is the decision-making processes used by Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower and how those processes affected the types of decisions made by those three presidents. For the most part, this paper examines the "rational actor" model of decision-making. That means that the actions of the principle figures, mainly the presidents, were a result of "purposeful actions" by the individuals.⁶

However, two other forces obviously influenced the actors and their actions. One is the "organizational process" which says that decisions are made because of the functioning of bureaucracies acting in "predictable patterns." In other words, sometimes things happen because of the way the structure is set up, and not necessarily because of the rational thought of the principle players. The final model examines the "internal politics" of making the decisions in the first place. A president may tend to regard the advice of one counselor over another simply because of personal preference or familiarity. In other words, although many advisors have the ability to influence the decision-making process, there exists a "pecking order"

as to how the advise is presented and received by the principle actors.⁷

The reader must understand that the facts in any analysis will seldom change. However, the perspective that the reader has of the case and how they are presented by the author influences how the reader views them. No analysis can ever be completely objective, no matter how diligently the author may work to accomplish that. But by understanding how the facts are presented and understanding what it is that the author is trying to convey, then the reader can better grasp the concepts that the author wants to impart and how the facts relate to that presentation.

Chapter 1:
Vietnam through World War I

European traders and merchants began to appear on Indochinese soil in the sixteenth century, but not until the seventeenth century did many gain any important influence. Also, French Jesuit missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the seventeenth century. They posed a definite threat to the established religious practices and beliefs of the Buddhists. Some however, became allied with certain Vietnamese rulers. One missionary, Pierre Pigneau de Behaine, helped a Southeast Asian warrior named Nguyen Anh defeat his enemies in the surrounding area. In 1802, Nguyen Anh united the three Asian provinces of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina into a new country he called "Vietnam." He then assumed the name of Gia Long, and became the first emperor of the unified region. In gratitude for de Behaine's assistance, the new ruler established economic ties with France.⁸

Gia Long's successor, however, was not as accommodating to the increased influence of the European priests. Because of some conflicting ideas between Christianity and Confucianism, the new monarch viewed the missionaries as subversives. In order to eliminate this problem, the ruler both forced the Europeans into hiding or imprisoned them.

Because of the influence of the Catholic Church back in Paris, French warships were deployed to Indochinese waters in the 1830s to besiege the Vietnamese and obtain the release of the imprisoned missionaries.⁹

During the mid-1800s, the French emperor Napoleon III desired to expand French influence in the region. The powerful influence of the Catholic Church and the Jesuit priests along with the French desire to compete with the British and Dutch in Southeast Asia were two important factors in his decision. Vietnam became a stepping stone in the European plan to open China to Western trade. The British had obtained Hong Kong as well as five other ports from China in the 1840s. Napoleon III desired to match the English advances as well as gain access to the Indochinese natural resources, such as rubber. In 1858, a combined Spanish and French naval force bombarded Da Nang harbor in central Vietnam. They soon captured the city of Tourane. The Europeans next concentrated their efforts on the southern portion of the country around the area of Saigon or present-day Ho Chi Minh city. By 1862, they had conquered the region around Saigon. And after two decades of conquest, the French took control of the entire region of Vietnam.¹⁰

The Vietnamese emperor Tu Duc signed the Treaty of Protectorate on August 25, 1883 which gave France political hegemony in the area. The French viewed the regions of

Tonkin in the north and Annam in central Vietnam as "protectorates," and they allowed the indigenous monarch to maintain some jurisdiction in these districts. The French considered the area of Cochinchina, the southern portion of present-day Vietnam, as a true economic "colony" of their Empire. All political and economic decisions were made by the French. This district would be the "crown jewel" of the French empire. In 1887, the three sectors--Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina--plus the Kingdom of Laos, a French protectorate since 1863, became known as the French Indochinese Union. The French later added Cambodia to this Southeast Asian union in 1893.¹¹

The French developed the region economically, especially the district of Cochinchina. In the north, they constructed a series of dikes on the Tonkin river. In the south, they drained the marshlands around the Mekong river delta and "encouraged" farming on this new land. (In other words, the French forced the peasants to develop this new soil.) They built a modern network of roads and railroads. And they established an education system fashioned after their own.

The French, however, did nothing to encourage any sort of political development among the indigenous peoples. They administered their colony by way of "direct rule." French officials controlled every aspect of the Vietnamese political organization, from the colonial to the local

levels. The French would not let any indigenous person, no matter how well qualified, to hold an office higher than that of a junior level administrator. Those Vietnamese who obtained low-level bureaucratic positions received one-third the salary paid to their French counterparts. This exclusion from public office and the graduated pay-scale favoring the colonists fueled the already-present feeling of resentment towards the French by twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals. That xenophobic hatred would help further kindle a spirit of nationalism in the region after World War I.¹²

At the end of the nineteenth century, in a remote village in the province of Annam, a minor administrative assistant gave birth to a son. They named him Nguyen Sinh Cung, the given name of Ho Chi Minh. Nguyen Sinh Cung would have many aliases throughout his lifetime including Nguyen Tat Thanh, Ly Thui, Linov, Tong Van So, Ba, and finally Ho Chi Minh. Nguyen Sinh Cung twice went with his family to Hue', where his father, Nguyen Dinh Sac, served in the Imperial Court. The second time, when he was fifteen, the future Vietnamese nationalist attended school there. He was deeply insulted at the arrogance of some of the French teachers. He was also angered by the intolerance and disdain the French felt for the Vietnamese peasants and workers. He felt that the school was "a lake of Western thought pouring out a stream of colonial philosophy to

irrigate and raise a crop of obedient Vietnamese servants useful to France."¹³

During the winter of 1911-1912, Nguyen Sinh Cung adopted the name Ba and became a crewmember on the French cruise-liner *Latouche-Treville* in the port of Saigon. His voyages took him to port cities in Portugal, Italy, and Spain. He also visited North Africa, the Congo and Madagascar. Some reports say that Nguyen's ship even docked in the port of New York City. Everywhere he had travelled, he saw the resentment shown by the Europeans colonists to people in Asia and Africa. But in America, the Vietnamese journeyman liked the notion of legal equality between the people of European descent and those who had immigrated from Asia. He also viewed the American city as a "prototype of progress" and wondered if someday, Hanoi, Hue', or Saigon could be like New York. This love of the American ideal would stay with him for much of his life.¹⁴

By 1913, Nguyen had reached England and joined a group of Asians, who, like him, were opposed to colonialism. Here, for the first time, he realized that only through political action would the French treat the Vietnamese living in Asia as anything other than servants. After about a year, he then set off for France to meet other Vietnamese who, he was told, were also interested in political reform in his native country. Recalling the differences between his recollections of his travels while on the freighter and

his time in the City of Lights, Nguyen commented to a close friend that

In France, the French are very good, but in the colonies, these French men are very mean, very inhuman[e]. . . . For the colonials, the life of the yellow or black people doesn't count at all.¹⁵

It would be a long time before that desire for equality between French and Vietnamese came anywhere near reality.

The Vietnamese dissident spent World War I living in France, discussing the meaning and implications of the war with others at the local coffee houses of Paris. Nguyen Sinh Cung dropped the alias of Ba and adopted the new pseudonym of Nguyen Ai Quoc, meaning Nguyen the Patriot. In 1919, cognizant of the on-going peace conference outside of the city, Nguyen attempted to meet the American President Woodrow Wilson at Versailles. (Wilson would begin a long succession of U.S. Chief Executives to have dealings with Nguyen Ai Quoc, or later Ho Chi Minh.)

Wilson regarded imperialism as a major cause of World War I. Regarding colonialism as an "atavistic system which provoked highly dangerous rivalry and competition," Wilson stated that he would try to include a phrase in the Treaty of Versailles regarding the right of self-determination for all peoples. However, as the Vietnamese nationalist would soon find out, Wilson wanted only to take away territory from the conquered, not the conquerors. The U.S. president had no intention of dismantling the empires of the British, or more importantly to Nguyen, the French.¹⁶

Nevertheless, Nguyen Ai Quoc thought that he might receive help from America in the Vietnamese struggle to end French colonial rule. He drew up a list of eight demands that he wanted to present to the American president. These demands included "Vietnamese autonomy, freedom of association, of religion, of the press, and equal rights between French and Vietnamese." He then sent this charter to the allied delegations, including the one representing the United States. Wilson, however, failed to help the Vietnamese. The Treaty of Versailles ended only the empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottomans. The colonial regimes of the victorious Western European powers remained intact. Nguyen Ai Quoc had to look elsewhere to get patronage for his objectives.¹⁷

Nguyen Ai Quoc remained in Paris after the Versailles Conference. Through articles in his anti-imperialist newspaper *Le Paria* (The Pariah), he expressed his resentment regarding the continued French presence in Indochina. His writings expressed a strong sympathy for the oppressed people in his native land. He likened the atrocities committed by the French troops to the lynchings of blacks conducted by the Ku Klux Klan in the southern part of the United States. While he sometimes used sarcasm to make a point, his essays always contained a caustic indictment of colonialism throughout the world.¹⁸

During this time period, Nguyen Ai Quoc also wrote his

first major work concerning his ideas about colonialism and the plight of the oppressed. The piece entitled "*Le Proces de la Colonisation Francaise*" was a 100-page treatise that outlined the inequities of colonial exploitation. In the first chapter, he verbally assailed the depravity and corruption that had infiltrated the French colonial administration. He called the colonial officials "leeches who drain the colonies' blood, not only for the benefit of the mother-country but to grow fat themselves." In a subsequent chapter, he warns the colonized people not to hold high expectations from "Madame Justice who has had such a rough passage on her voyage to Indo-China that she's lost everything except her sword." Although this piece severely lashed out at the colonial system as a whole and the French administration specifically, the writer never mentioned any type specific political reform, including any desire to adapt the concepts of communism in his homeland.¹⁹

While in Paris, a friend gave Nguyen Ai Quoc a French translation of Vladimir Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions." The Russian revolutionary leader had delivered this discourse at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. Lenin realized the importance of using nationalist movements in Asia and Africa to help the communist struggle against capitalism and the imperialist empires. His speech served both as a "call for national revolution in the colonial world" and an offer by

the Communist International to help struggling revolutionaries. And it established the necessary training and source of "funds and advice" to aid the colonized in their struggle against the colonizers.²⁰

Nguyen Ai Quoc had finally found the support he desired for Vietnam's liberation from their imperialist oppressors. He re-read Lenin's paper several times to be sure he understood every point. The connection between Vietnamese nationalism and Russian communism was now firmly established. Recalling his sentiment, Nguyen Ai Quoc commented:

What emotion, enthusiasm, clear-sightedness, and confidence it instilled in me! I was overjoyed to tears. Though sitting alone in my room I shouted aloud as if addressing large crowds: "Dead martyrs, compatriots! this is what we need, this is the path to liberation!" After then, I had entire confidence in Lenin.²¹

Nguyen Ai Quoc completely committed himself to the beliefs of Lenin. But the question that immediately comes to mind is "Aside for the anti-imperialist tone of Marx's writing, why did the concepts of communism have such an immediate appeal for Nguyen Ai Quoc?" Charles Fenn, an American operative in Vietnam during World War II, provides some insight into this query. He writes that the Vietnamese dissident was a dreamer, an idealist as well as a pragmatist. He perceived that his fellow Vietnamese had greatly suffered economically because of the oppression of the French colonists. The idea of patiently waiting for

change--found in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity--seemed to offer little relief or comfort. But, Fenn writes, Marxism provided the "inevitability of proletarian victory." It was in these ideas that Nguyen had found a path for revolutionary change in Vietnam.²²

On December 30, 1920, following the split of the French Socialist Party at the Congress at Tours, Nguyen Ai Quoc became a charter member of the French Communist Party. He changed the subtitle of his newspaper from "Tribune of the Colonial People" to "Tribune of the Colonial Proletariat." He spent the next ten years travelling throughout Europe and Asia, learning and later teaching the tenets of communism to other potential Asian revolutionaries. He even spent some time in Moscow studying at the University of the Peoples of the East. Although he did not have the opportunity to meet Lenin himself, he probably did cross paths with Lenin's future successor, Joseph Stalin. This meeting may have saved his life during the time of the Stalin purges of the party. All the while and in every encounter, Nguyen waited and looked for the opportunity to begin Vietnam's own "war of liberation" from French oppression.²³

Near the end of the 1920s, the Comintern dispatched Nguyen Ai Quoc from his assignment in Thailand to unite the fractionalized communist movement in Vietnam. The French, however, banned the exile from returning to his homeland, lest he be immediately imprisoned. Instead, Nguyen Ai Quoc

met with the leaders of the three prominent Vietnamese communist factions in Hong Kong at the end of 1929. It was during this series of meetings that the future Vietnamese leader displayed his own interpretation of the link between communism and nationalism when, on February 18, 1930, he wrote the first party platform for the Indochinese Communist Party. In the list of his ten objectives, Nguyen Ai Quoc included, "to overthrow French imperialism . . . to make Indochina completely independent . . . [and to] establish democratic liberty, provide universal education, and establish equality between men and women." Also included in those demands were the desire to confiscate all of the property belonging to the French and redistribute it to the peasants. This young band of revolutionaries was on their way towards the liberation of their country from the French oppressors, or so they thought.²⁴

Later that year, the new party's leadership incited a series of peasant revolts in the northern portion of the country. The colonizers, being militarily superior, easily suppressed the disturbance with aircraft and overwhelming firepower. By the middle of 1931, the French returned relative tranquility to the region. Nguyen Ai Quoc, still unable to return to Vietnam, stayed informed about the incidents from the safety of Hong Kong. Although incapable of doing anything else, he had left his recently-organized peasant party to bear the brunt of the French wrath. He

remained in exile for another ten years, secretly moving from Hong Kong to China. All the while, he waited for his next chance to overthrow the French overlords. He even went so far as to fake his own death, that is the death of Nguyen Ai Quoc. The Vietnamese dissident would emerge ten years later with a new name--Ho Chi Minh. This latest pseudonym means "He Who Enlightens." And the enemy he faced this time was not so much the French but the Japanese.²⁵

Chapter 2:

Ho Chi Minh and Franklin Roosevelt

The next time a United States Chief Executive crossed paths with the Vietnamese nationalist leader occurred during World War II. Following the defeat of France by the Germans in 1940, Japan forced the French to make concessions concerning their Asian colonies. These accommodations included the stationing of Japanese troops and aircraft on Indochinese soil and allowing the Japanese to control all of the port and harbor facilities. The Japanese did allow the French to maintain some administrative control over the region. Nevertheless, the Japanese soon looked on Indochina as another member of its East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. As long as Japan controlled the surrounding oceans, Indochina sent raw materials like tin and rubber to the Pacific-island imperialists.²⁶

President Franklin Roosevelt sympathized with the "brown people of the East" and aspired to help them in their struggle to achieve self-determination after the war. During a press conference on March 15, 1941, he remarked, "there never has been . . . there never will be any race of people . . . fit to serve as masters over their fellow man. We believe that any nationality . . . has the inherent right to nationhood." Roosevelt decided that the Allies should

form an "international trusteeship" to monitor the political activities of the Associated States. The West would oversee the affairs of the under-developed nations, including Indochina, until the indigenous people proved themselves ready for the "burdens and responsibilities" of self-rule.²⁷

In August 1941, President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter. The tenet in this document which called for "right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live" left no doubt about the rhetorical position of America regarding colonialism. On several occasions during the war, United States officials commented on the universal applicability of that concept. In a radio address on February 23, 1942, Roosevelt declared that the "Atlantic Charter not only applies to the parts of the world that border on the Atlantic, but to the whole world." In a speech later that year, Secretary of State Cordell Hull stated, "The age of imperialism is ended. . . . The principles of the Atlantic Charter must be guaranteed to the world--in all oceans and continents."²⁸

Writing about the President's "egalitarian nationalism," John Lewis Gaddis said that Roosevelt possessed a "streak of idealism" which led him to believe that the objectives championed in the Atlantic Charter might actually be attainable after the war. The President regarded the "plebiscite method of determining boundaries

and forms of government as 'the most substantial contribution made by the Versailles Treaty.'" Roosevelt felt the secret arrangements made by the Allies during World War I regarding their colonial empires had been one of the greatest mistakes of that conflict. He believed that these covert accords had distracted the Allies from their fight with the Germans, especially at the end of the war.²⁹

Roosevelt also believed that these secret agreements had violated the principle of self-determination advocated by President Woodrow Wilson. In turn, they further sowed the seeds for the outbreak of another war in Europe in the not-so-distant future. "We will not accept a world, like the postwar world of the 1920s, in which the seeds of Hitlerism can again be planted and allowed to grow." Roosevelt, therefore, intended to handle things differently. His trusteeship idea would be one of the most prominent post-war goals he held. And the principles underwritten by the Atlantic Charter would serve as his basic premise concerning colonialism in the post-war period.³⁰

According to historian Lloyd Gardner, Roosevelt had one other reason to advocate the principles held in the Atlantic Charter. The President feared post-war chaos might occur as the fading European powers attempted to retake their colonies in search of "lost glory." By acting in both an enlightened and a *realpolitik* manner, Roosevelt hoped he could eliminate such European squabbling and at the same

time actually help some of the under-developed nations achieve self-determination.³¹

Prime Minister Churchill regarded the Atlantic Charter as only "an interim and partial statement of war aims designed to assure all countries of our righteous purpose." And despite the rhetoric of self-determination found in the Atlantic Charter, Churchill stated, as early as June 1940, that "the aim of Great Britain is the complete restoration of French territory, colonial and metropolitan." He believed that Roosevelt was trying to pass a "final judgment" on colonialism and felt that if the President successfully dismantled the French colonial empire, the British colonies would be next. A September 1943 British foreign policy memorandum warned "it would be unwise to undermine the possibilities of close cooperation with a friendly France." And, international control of Indochina would not work since it allowed China an opportunity to become more involved in Southeast Asian affairs. The British believed that the United States wanted a China "that was strong enough to police Asia but weak enough to be dependent on the United States." Because of British interests in Asia and a disagreement over the role of China after the war, Churchill and Roosevelt often verbally clashed over the post-war status of French Indochina.³²

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27, 1943. The President then ordered Secretary Hull to present the idea to the Russians at the Moscow conference in October 1943. Eden had several objections to the plan and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov suggested a need to study the issue further. At the Cairo Conference in November 1943, Roosevelt and Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek agreed on the American ideas for Southeast Asia. Chiang told the President that the Vietnamese people "were difficult to handle." The Chinese nationalist leader agreed with Roosevelt's plans for the region, stating "China and the United States should endeavor together to help Indochina achieve independence after the war."³³

Roosevelt then discussed the issue with the Soviet Premier, Joseph Stalin, at the Tehran conference one week after the Cairo conference. Roosevelt related to Stalin that Chiang had assured him that China had no designs on Indochina after the war. And the Chinese leader had already agreed with the President to the establishment of the trusteeship system. Stalin agreed with Roosevelt's plan as well. He remarked that he did not want to spill Russian blood to return French colonial rule in the region. And Stalin believed that any post-war peace settlement should not return to France the status of a world power. Roosevelt was encouraged by Stalin's cooperation on this issue and he remained anxious to resolve the Indochina question as quickly as possible. But, being aware of Churchill's

attitudes regarding the eradication of colonial empires and the prime minister's feelings about France, the President did not push for a final resolution of the Indochina issue at Tehran.³⁴

The United States Chief Executive delayed making a final decision on Indochina during all of 1944, despite his vehemence for giving colonized people the right to self-determination. He faced continued opposition to his plan from the British. This was coupled with the strong determinism of Free French leader General Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle left no doubt that he fully intended to restore the French empire after the war. Despite De Gaulle's rhetoric about returning France to its former glory, in mid-October of 1944, Roosevelt told his Secretary of State, "Indochina must not go back to the French." Additionally, China's chances as a post-war policemen wavered when they failed to stop a Japanese advance in Burma against allied forces led by General Joseph Stilwell. Roosevelt told his cabinet in April that "he was apprehensive . . . as to China holding together for the duration of the war."³⁵

America's chance for peaceful cooperation with the Soviets on post-war matters such as colonial trusteeships worsened during that year. In September, W. Averill Harriman, United States ambassador to the Soviet Union, warned Roosevelt that the Russians "threatened to become a world bully wherever their interests are involved." And at

the Dumbarton Oaks conference in Washington D.C. during the autumn of 1944, where the allies refined some of the foundation for the United Nations, Roosevelt completely avoided any discussion about the issue of trusteeships. In January 1945, he commented, "I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indochina decision. That is an issue for [the] postwar."³⁶

Prime Minister Churchill, President Roosevelt, and Marshall Stalin met one last time before the President's death. Their final meeting took place at Yalta in February 1945. At this juncture, Roosevelt tried to avoid more tedious discussions concerning trusteeships and Indochina. Churchill, however, pressured him to modify his position on the trusteeship concept. Roosevelt commented that Churchill balked at the idea of trusteeships since it might "bust up their empire." For this reason, Roosevelt believed Churchill wanted to save the French empire from becoming trusteeships in the United Nations.³⁷

The allied leaders did not invite General de Gaulle to attend the Yalta summit, despite their preplanned agenda of discussing post-war trusteeships. One month before the conference, the French general wrote the governments of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, formally requesting the opportunity to attend. He wrote that French participation was necessary "in matters concerning . . . the future of peace [in the world]--problems in which the

responsibility of France is obviously engaged." The Frenchman did not get an invitation.³⁸

De Gaulle blamed Roosevelt for not receiving an invitation to attend the meeting of the wartime allies. De Gaulle believed that Churchill supported him, and Stalin was opposed to his presence. This left Roosevelt to decide whether or not to include him. Actually, Stalin probably would not have minded de Gaulle attending, since he might have tried to build a friendship with the French against the Anglo-Saxons of England and the United States. And it was Churchill who said that "France is not on the same level as the three of us." For whatever reason, the French leader did not attend the Yalta conference. This exclusion would affect how he acted towards his colonies after the conclusion of World War II.³⁹

The three allied leaders did finally agree that the post-war arrangement would only concern "territories taken from the enemy." Additionally, as stipulated during the Dumbarton Oaks meeting, territories that the League of Nations still administered would become trusteeships under the auspices of the United Nations. Finally, the allied colonial powers, including France and Britain, could place their colonies under U.N. trusteeship if their leaders so desired.⁴⁰

Roosevelt died two months after this meeting. Despite his idealistic aspirations, military realities and political

maneuvering had forced him to alter his ideas of a post-war trusteeship system. He knew that de Gaulle had no intention of voluntarily surrendering any part of the French empire. In 1943, the French leader promised to "give a new political status to Indochina within the French community" after the war. But Roosevelt believed the French should abandon all claims to the region, saying, "after 100 years of French rule, the inhabitants [of Indochina] were worse off than before." The anti-colonial sentiments that motivated Roosevelt during his wartime conferences would continue to influence United States policy regarding Southeast Asia throughout the post-war period.⁴¹

The Japanese ousted the French completely from Indochina in March 1945 following the liberation of Paris by the allies. As they had done in Laos and Cambodia, the Japanese set up a puppet regime in Vietnam. The leader of the collaboration government in Indochina was Emperor Bao Dai. By this time, the United States and Vietnamese had become *de facto* military allies. Nguyen Ai Quoc, who had died in 1932 only to be reborn as Ho Chi Minh, had returned to Indochina in February 1941. He became the main Vietnamese point of contact for the Americans. His anti-Japanese resistance group, the National Front for the Independence of Vietnam or the Vietminh, provided the Americans with invaluable intelligence information about the military activities of the Pacific member of the Axis

alliance. The Vietnamese also sabotaged Japanese military fortifications and rescued a downed American pilot, Lt. Shaw, returning him safely to the American Army Air Forces headquarters in China.⁴²

The Vietminh were known in Vietnamese as "Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh," meaning the League for the Independence of Vietnam. Its primary objective was to oust the "French fascists and Japanese accomplices." The League consisted of a coalition of several Vietnamese anti-Japanese organizations. According to Bernard Fall, besides Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party, it encompassed the new Vietnam Party, the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, the Vietnam Nationalist Party and several other smaller groups. Ho Chi Minh told his followers that the primary purpose to the organization must first be independence, and their motivation was strictly to be patriotic. Their flag would be the Vietnamese flag, and their aim would be "*Cuu Quoc*," or National Salvation.⁴³

To get the entire indigenous Vietnamese population involved in resisting the Japanese, the Vietminh developed several National Salvation associations. These included "Workers for National Salvation, Peasants for National Salvation, and the National Salvation Associations for Old Folks, Women, Army men and Youth." They organized everything around a theme of National Salvation, joining together to overthrow the Japanese. During the war, the

concept of nationalism, already entrenched in Vietnamese society, flourished because of the activities of the Vietminh. Ho Chi Minh's concepts of communism, which he later termed "national-socialism," would have to wait until the Vietnamese defeated the Pacific imperialists.⁴⁴

The Vietminh was not the only nationalist league that rose up against the Japanese during World War II. Two other nationalist coalitions formed around the same time. They were the "Dong Minh Hoi" and the "Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang." There was a distinct reason, though, why the Vietminh got more support from the Vietnamese people than the other groups. The other organizations tended to be more upper-class. They did not want to change the entire social order in Vietnam. Instead, they only desired to get rid of the French at the top of the social structure. The Vietminh referred to this class of people as "bourgeois nationalists," which meant they were men who had been schooled in the French educational system and now held high-level positions within the colonial administration.

Historian John McAlister writes that

The anti-French spirit they manifested was emphatically not a result of rejection of French culture, but a result of their impatience at being blocked in their occupational mobility with a French-made framework just short of managing the affairs of their [own] country.⁴⁵

There is little doubt why then, in a country with a huge peasant base, especially in the countryside, the Vietminh would received the lion's share of support for their

activities.

The Vietnamese were stuck with a difficult dilemma-- which foreign regime holding power in Indochina was worse, the French or the Japanese? In a story told to American Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) agent Archimedes Patti about the famine which devastated Indochina during the winter of 1944-1945, Ho Chi Minh related their predicament of which was the worse of two evils. The crops in Tonkin had been destroyed by typhoons and flooding. This was followed by shortages of medicine, food, and clothing. Many people in Tonkin and Annam became too weak to work. Livestock died in the fields.

Instead of intervening to help alleviate the situation, the Japanese and French imposed impossible quotas for the requisitioning of rice. Not only had the famine claimed the lives of almost 2 million Vietnamese, it also fanned the fire of hatred towards both colonial powers since only Vietnamese died of starvation. The French and Japanese who lived primarily in the cities were unaffected. The Vietminh later used this disaster as a means of mobilizing the peasants against both outside powers, shouting, "Save the people from starvation."⁴⁶

The Japanese had organized some of their best combat units for their military take-over of Vietnam. Therefore, they had seized control in Indochina with little French opposition. A little-known position which would be one of

the last spots the French would hold on to was a remote base called Dien Bien Phu. For two months, this area served as the headquarters for the last-ditch French resistance against the Japanese. Planes belonging to the "Flying Tigers" of American Air Forces General Claire Chennault landed at Dien Bien Phu with supplies and ammunition for the French troops. Two French Potez-25 fighter aircraft used the airstrip as a staging point for operations against the attackers. These two planes logged more than 150 flying hours in the forty days that the area remained in allied control. Although few knew of the location or even the name "Dien Bien Phu" in 1945, this remote post would almost become a household term in France and, to a lesser extent the United States, nine years later.⁴⁷

When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, a wave of independence fervor swept through the Far East. The Vietnamese referred to this desire as "*Doc Lap*." Two things sparked this flame of freedom. The initial Japanese defeat of the French confirmed the fact that an Asian army could expel the once invincible European colonizers. No longer did these people have to believe they were too weak to defeat a colonial army. And, as an independent nation, these former colonies could be eligible for membership in the General Assembly of the newly-formed United Nations. In this congress, all representatives had the same voting power as everyone else--one nation, one vote. Therefore,

theoretically, these former colonies held the same amount of sway in world affairs as their former colonial masters.⁴⁸

Ho Chi Minh, though now very anxious to continue the struggle for independence, was melancholy about his chances for immediate success. In a letter to an American O.S.S. agent written shortly after the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Ho Chi Minh commented, "The war is over. But we small and subject countries have no share, or very small share, in the victory of freedom and democracy. Probably, if we want to get a sufficient share, we have still to fight." Nonetheless, the Vietnamese, like the other Asians, attempted to throw off their yoke of subjugation. On August 19, 1945, the Vietminh took control of Hanoi and Emperor Bao Dai resigned. Though anxious to regain her colony, France had been weakened by World War II and was unable to deal with all their problems immediately after the peace. No French troops marched into Hanoi to stop the Vietminh. On September 2, 1945 in a square in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnam's independence and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Quoting from the words of Thomas Jefferson, Ho Chi Minh said to the crowd of 500,000 joyous Vietnamese:

All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights: The right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve Happiness. . . . These immortal words are taken from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America of 1776. In a larger sense this means that: All the people have the right to live, to be happy, to be free. . . . We are convinced that the Allied

nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principle of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam. Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country.⁴⁹

Vo Nguyen Giap later wrote that the "August General Insurrection" followed by the establishment of the DRV was a "great victory" for the Vietnamese and the Indochinese Communist Party. The success of their "liberation movement" proved to the Vietminh that they might someday be victorious in their fight for the independence of their country.⁵⁰

Several sources believe that Ho Chi Minh did not use the quote from the great American philosopher as a ruse just to gain support from America to rebuild Vietnam and later he would turn against the United States. According to the principle American representative in Vietnam during World War II, O.S.S. agent Archimedes Patti, the Vietnamese leader knew he would receive no support from "heroic" Russia. Their Great Patriotic War had economically devastated the Soviet Union. Historic antagonism with the Chinese made Ho Chi Minh believe that they could not be counted upon. England, France, and the Netherlands would never accept his anti-colonial rhetoric. In fact, Ho Chi Minh knew that somehow the French would land its soldiers on Indochinese soil and attempt to again subvert Vietnam to colonial status. The only nation he could turn to was the United States. Its history of anti-colonialism and recent war-time rhetoric made him believe that the Americans were the only

ones who would lend a "sympathetic" ear to his cause. And yet, despite such lofty desires, Ho Chi Minh cynically asked agent Patti if the Atlantic Charter would apply "only to white European nations and exclud[ed] Asian and African colonials."⁵¹

Another O.S.S. agent Charles Fenn writes that because of the Germany-Soviet Union non-aggression pact of 1939, Japan had initially not been considered an "imperialist enemy." The Comintern, therefore, had encouraged neutrality towards the Pacific aggressors. However, during World War II, Ho Chi Minh had experienced first-hand the ramifications of Japanese oppression. For this reason, his convictions about the ends of international communism began to waiver ever so slightly. Fenn continues by saying that Ho Chi Minh viewed communism as a means, not an ends to achieving independence from the French. The strange-bedfellows arrangement between the Germans, Soviets, and Japanese further supported this philosophy. Communism may help the Vietnamese achieve independence, but nationalism was their true motivation.⁵²

Jean Sainteny also provides some insight into the dilemma Ho Chi Minh faced at the end of the war. He also describes why Vietnam could not turn immediately to China for help in its struggles. Nationalist China, as will be discussed a later paragraph, sent troops into Vietnam to accept the Japanese surrender. The problem with this was

that Ho Chi Minh knew these troops would become an army of occupation and not an assistance in liberation. Could he then turn to the Soviets? Sainteny says that at this time, Stalin was more concerned with Eastern Europe than with Asia. And what about France? For most of his adult life, Ho Chi Minh had railed against French colonialism. Now, although the French communist party was moving into a position that looked like it was gaining a great amount of political clout, Ho Chi Minh was cautious about making any hastily-decided deals. Sainteny quips, "He had waited for thirty-five years [to achieve independence], and he could wait a few more years. Patience is an Oriental virtue."⁵³

There is, however, one writer who believed that Ho Chi Minh's appeals to the United States were a trick. Jean Lacouture wrote that the Vietminh exploited the anti-colonial feeling that was prevalent among American actors and policy makers in Asia at that time. Ho Chi Minh made sure he was seen often with Major Patti during official occasions. Receiving American aid was more of a means to an ends, instead of the ends themselves. According to Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh divided his revolution into two movements. The first was nationalist, and he would receive support from the Vietnamese peasants as well as the United States. The second phase, though, would bring socialism to Vietnam. This was Ho Chi Minh's ultimate goal. With or without outside assistance from the Soviet Union, China,

France or the United States, the road to independence for Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese was sure to be a rough one.⁵⁴

Under the provisions of the Potsdam agreement, Nationalist China would accept Japan's surrender in the northern portion of Vietnam, while Great Britain would occupy the part of Vietnam south of the 16 degrees North latitude line. The United States ambassador to China, General Patrick Hurley, commented on August 13, 1945 that "France is urgently desirous of complete reestablishment of her authority in Indochina" at the earliest moment possible. Secretary of State James Byrnes told the ambassador that he suggested to the British and Chinese that the French should be invited to be present at the Japanese surrender of Indochina. On August 17, the Chinese government agreed to allow the corps of 5,000 French troops stationed on the Chinese-Vietnamese border to return to Indochina and be present at the ceremonies for the Japanese surrender.⁵⁵

The return of the 5,000 French soldiers to Vietnam was just the first step in France's bid to restore its control in Indochina. The commander of the British sector in Indochina was British Major General Douglas Gracey. Three weeks after Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence and just one month after the return of French soldiers to Indochina, French saboteurs overthrew the local DRV in the south and restored French authority to Cochinchina. A "traditional British colonial officer," Gracey felt that

colonial people simply do not just declare their independence. It must be granted to them by the colonizers. For this reason, Gracey, although having full knowledge of the French action, failed to intervene on behalf of the Vietnamese.⁵⁶

General Gracey had to help the French because he believed that they were "in the right." But the violence in Saigon continued though. On September 21, the British commander imposed martial law, and ordered all allied officers, including American O.S.S. agents, to fire freely upon any Vietnamese carrying a gun. This included all Vietnamese members of the military, all civil guards, and all police units. Gracey also demanded that the Japanese, who had not yet officially surrendered, help him maintain public order. These directives incensed both the Americans and the Japanese who wanted to end all European presence in Vietnam. Eventually, by the first week of October, he was able to work out a truce between the warring factions. But that was short-lived. And the future threat of even greater violence in the region loomed ominously on the horizon.⁵⁷

The two surrender ceremonies in the north and south differed tremendously. On September 28, 1945, in an elaborate ceremony in the Governor General's Palace, Japanese Lieutenant General Yuitsu Tsuchihashi, senior commander of the Japanese forces in Tonkin, signed the surrender document in the presence of Chinese General Lu

Han, nationalist Chinese commander of the Yunnan province. Four large flags hung in the massive room. On the right were the American and Soviet banners. On the left hung the Chinese and British flags. No colors of the French or Vietnamese were displayed anywhere in the room. It was obvious that the question of the status of post-war Indochina, at least concerning the Tonkin and Annam regions, remained unanswered.⁵⁸

Seven weeks prior to the surrender ceremony in the south, on October 9, 1945, Britain and France signed an accord that returned to the French full recognition of their rights in Indochina. French troops began returning in mass to the region later that month. The actual surrender observance occurred in Saigon on November 30, 1945 in the courtyard at the villa residence of General Gracey. British Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander for the South East Asia Command (SEAC), received a box containing two swords from Field Marshal Count Hisaichi Terauchi, commander of the Japanese Expeditionary Forces in the Southwest Pacific theater. The swords symbolized the Japanese final act of surrender. The entire program was over in a few minutes. There were no flags, and little fanfare, much less dramatic than the ceremony conducted by the Chinese in the north.⁵⁹

Immediately following the ceremony, Admiral Mountbatten met with senior French and British officials. He told

French General Jacques Philippe Leclerc that the British hoped to withdraw their first brigade of men by the end of December. That would be followed one month later by the departure of General Gracey, his divisional headquarters, and the second brigade. Leclerc asked if this last brigade could wait and leave when the French had enough troops to maintain order and guard all the disarmed Japanese in the country. Mountbatten said that he wanted to help the French as much as possible but that matter, as well as others in dispute, would have to be negotiated at higher levels. None the less, the Briton had no objection to the French general immediately taking over command of the French forces which had already arrived in Indochina. There was no little doubt that the French were well on their way towards trying to regain complete control over all of Indochina.⁶⁰

Chapter 3:

Harry S. Truman and the Start of the War in Indochina

During the winter of 1945-1946, Ho Chi Minh sent a series of dispatches to President Truman and ranking members of the U.S. Congress, appealing for help in gaining independence and to stop the further return of French troops to Vietnam. He invoked the principles of the Atlantic Charter and the U.N. charter and pleaded for United States recognition of the DRV. Like it had done at the Versailles conference after World War I, the United States slighted his petitions. In October 1945, Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, wired a telegram to the U.S. plenipotentiary in China, saying, "[the] US has no thought of opposing the reestablishment of French control in Indochina." However, the U.S. would not support the French with force. And the French must promise to help the Vietnamese towards self-rule. Although it included some anti-colonial rhetoric, the position of the United States was shifting away from the hardline of Roosevelt and trusteeships.⁶¹

Truman's policy towards the Vietnamese remained constant for the next several years. His decision to ignore the Vietminh and side with the French centered around his feelings regarding the destruction, both economically and politically, that Europe endured because of World War II.

These feelings also influenced the grave concern he had for other popular uprisings in Greece and Italy. Truman feared that a situation of famine and economic disaster might help the communist parties in these countries to gain political control. A few years later, in a radio message in October 1947, Truman told the American people that the "perils of hunger and cold in Europe make this winter a decisive time in history. All the progress of reconstruction and all the promise of future plans are endangered." America had to help these nations survive this crisis. Maintaining a non-communist Europe during these post-war years of economic and political turmoil was "so essential to world peace." Issues like colonialism in Asia, though still important to Truman's administration, would have to wait.⁶²

Additionally, Truman, almost from the start of his presidency, and continuing at the conference at Potsdam and throughout his time in office, made no effort to conceal his hatred of the Soviet Union. He also had immense disdain for the continued presence of the Soviet Red Army in Eastern Europe. Events in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, as well as the Balkans, Albania and other countries in Eastern Europe during the middle 1940s (not to mention the Soviet blockade of the western sectors of Berlin) made him believe that this was not a military force maintaining a buffer zone against another invasion from the West. There was little doubt that was an army preparing for an massive invasion

into the West.

Like many Americans, Truman began to see a monolithic communist movement, headquartered in Moscow, with international reaches to spread communism throughout the world. Robert Blum writes that by 1947, the terms "communism" and "nationalism" had, in the State Department, become mutually exclusive. To follow-on to that sentiment, policy makers believed that Stalin was obviously involved in some fashion in all uprisings against legitimate governments everywhere. Because of these convictions, Truman made every effort to strengthen the ties between the United States, Great Britain, and France against the threat of the Russian bear.⁶³

The United States definitely would not have objected had the French decided to grant limited sovereignty to Vietnam, with the promise of increased autonomy in the future. But it gave up whatever bargaining power it may have had on the basic premise that European security meant more to U.S. interests than colonial reform. France strongly desired to reincorporate the Associated States of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as satellites in the French Union. Truman understood the colonial designs of the French and their desire to restore their empire, but his regard for affairs in Europe over Asia made him adopt a position of neutrality on the issue in Vietnam. Because of Cold War concerns, Truman would not intervene on behalf of Ho Chi Minh.⁶⁴

Getting back to the situation in Vietnam, a parade in Saigon on March 18, 1946 marked the end of the British military presence in Vietnam. Similar to the treaty negotiated with the British in October, a Franco-Chinese agreement on February 28 had set up the provisions for the French to take control of the Tonkin region by March 31. In the meantime, on March 6, Ho Chi Minh signed an agreement with the French whereby they recognized the DRV as a "Free State having its own Government, its own Parliament, its own Army and its own Finances" within the French Union. In return, the Vietnamese "welcomed amicably" the French reentry into North Vietnam after the departure of the Chinese. Neither side expected the treaty to have much effect in allaying tensions. So both sides agreed to hold forthright negotiations in France to iron out the details. Only two opposing forces now remained in Indochina.⁶⁵

The immediate reaction among the Vietnamese people to the March 6 accords was very negative. Six months earlier, they had been promised independence and the future looked bright. Now, they were back in the French Union. Rumors quickly circulated that Ho Chi Minh was a spy, or at best, a traitor. The Vietminh leadership decided to hold an assembly the next day to explain their position to the people. One by one, the leaders addressed the crowd. The last to speak was Ho Chi Minh. He told the assembly that he had decided to negotiate a temporary settlement with the

French rather than risk fifty or one hundred thousand lives. He truly believed that total freedom was possible within the next five years. With tears in his eyes, he concluded:

I, Ho Chi Minh, have always led you along the path to freedom; I have spent my whole life fighting for our country's independence. You know I would sooner die than betray the nation. I swear I have not betrayed you!"⁶⁶

At that point, all doubts were gone. It seemed as if the Vietnamese collectively had decided to support their beloved leader and accept the March 6 agreement.

Ho Chi Minh led the Vietnamese delegation to the Fountainbleu conference in Paris in June 1946. The agenda for the meeting centered on a discussion of Vietnam's status as a "state" within the French Union. At its conclusion about six weeks later, the conference left several questions unresolved. The major stumbling block was the future of the status of Indochina within the French empire. Ho Chi Minh wanted an independent nation, but he wanted to keep close political ties with Cambodia, Laos, and France. The French, however, interpreted "free" as allowing Ho Chi Minh to maintain limited autonomy within the empire.⁶⁷

Remarks by the new French representative in Indochina had overshadowed the prospects of a favorable resolution between the Vietnamese and the French during the meeting. On May 30, without authorization from Paris, the French Commissioner for Vietnam, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, already outspoken about his dislike for the Vietnamese,

announced the establishment of the Republic of Cochinchina. This "free state" would have its own government, military, and currency and would occupy a position in the French Union under similar terms that Ho Chi Minh had arranged for the DRV in the French Union two months earlier.⁶⁸

D'Argenlieu's comments created yet another obstacle in the peace process. Ho Chi Minh had been more than willing to make certain concessions to the French representative, Jean Sainteny, in the name of progress towards peace. But d'Argenlieu's announcement affected an area in which the Vietnamese leader would not compromise. The Vietnamese word *doc lap* could be interpreted into the French as either "independence" or "freedom." Ho Chi Minh, though, wanted the concept to apply to the entire country of Vietnam. He wanted to keep the three regions or three "Kys" of the country--Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina--together at all costs. He would not allow for one region to be treated any differently than any other section. Therefore, because of D'Argenlieu's rhetoric and the lack of progress at the Fountainbleu conference, the Vietminh attitudes towards the return of the French to the region turned even more sour. This also may have explained Ho Chi Minh's comment to a Frenchman on the day the Vietnamese leader set sail to return to Indochina. Ho Chi Minh remarked, "If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of my men while we kill one of yours. But you will be the ones to end up

exhausted." Chances for any form of reconciliation seemed to dwindle even more.⁶⁹

Some more-militant members of the Vietminh felt that Ho Chi Minh had been too accommodating to the French in March and June. The Vietnamese president, however, believed that it better served the Vietnamese interests to first get rid of the Chinese, and then expel the French. "It is better to sniff French dung for awhile than to eat China's s--- all of our lives." This would be the method Ho Chi Minh would employ between 1945 and 1975 during the Vietnamese "war of liberation." First, they had evicted the Japanese in 1945. The short stint of British occupation ended in early 1946. The Chinese would be gone two months later. Then, the Vietminh would concentrate their efforts on the French. And finally, if the Americans intervened to help the French, they would have to be ousted as well.⁷⁰

Because of the lack of progress in the peace process as well as the d'Argenlieu's comments, the Vietminh started making limited attacks on French civilians and military installations in June of that year. Open clashes between the Vietminh and the Europeans did not occur until October and November 1946. In the fall of 1946, the French announced that they were opening a customs house in Haiphong in an effort to control trade. Ho Chi Minh protested to the government in Paris that this action was a violation of the accords agreed to earlier in the year. Tensions rose as the

dispute went unresolved.

On November 20, a Chinese boat made its way into the harbor. The French suspected it was loaded with contraband, including fuel and weapons for the Vietminh, and ordered it to unload in a French-controlled area. A Vietnamese guard protested and fired at the French patrol. The Europeans promptly returned their volleys. The French military commander for that area of the country ordered the Chinese sector of the town cleared of Vietnamese. He could not, however, accomplish this task without help from the French navy. On orders from Saigon, a French cruiser shelled the port of Haiphong, slaughtering 6,000 civilians. The situation only worsened. In the middle of December, the French command demanded that the Vietnamese nationalists immediately discard their weapons. The storm clouds of conflict loomed on the horizon.⁷¹

On December 11, Ho Chi Minh told an interviewer for the *Paris-Saigon* newspaper that "we [the Vietminh] want to avoid this war at any cost." Jean Sainteny, Ho Chi Minh's counterpart from the meetings in Paris that previous summer, was headed to the area to try and help resolve the situation. Within a week, though, the Vietnamese leader's sentiment changed because of the French military demands to disarm the Vietminh "self defense groups." On December 19, Vietminh General Vo Nguyen Giap, believing the "colonialists chose war which [would lead] to their ruin," called for

nation-wide resistance. The next day, Ho Chi Minh echoed Giap's conviction, saying:

We, the Vietnamese Government and people, are determined to struggle for our country's independence. . . . The Vietnamese people will never again tolerate foreign domination. The Vietnamese people will never again be enslaved. They would rather die than lose their independence and freedom. . . . The Fatherland is in danger, let all of us stand up! Long live the victorious war of resistance.⁷²

Towards the end of his speech, Ho Chi Minh told the Vietnamese people that the ensuing war would probably be long and painful. But, "whatever the sacrifices, however long the struggle, we shall fight to the end, until Vietnam is fully independent and reunified." The last phrase was obviously an attack on d'Argenlieu's attempt to make Cochinchina a separate entity. Ho Chi Minh would never stand for such an arrangement.⁷³

Later that day, Vietnamese forces assaulted several French outposts along the road between Hanoi and Haiphong. Following this incident, Ho Chi Minh defined how the Vietminh would eventually win their "war of liberation:"

It will be a war between a tiger [the Vietminh] and an elephant [the French.] If ever the tiger pauses, the elephant will impale him on his mighty tusks. Only the tiger doesn't stop. He lurks in the jungle by day and emerges only at night. He will leap onto the elephant and rip his back to shreds before disappearing again into the shadows, and the elephant will die from exhaustion and loss of blood.⁷⁴

The war had begun. General Leclerc, the first French commander in Indochina, employed a technique known as *tache d'huile* (the oil-slick) to reinstate French authority in the

area controlled by the Vietminh. This method concentrated on the establishment of "strong points" in a given district. The French military divided these districts into small squares like on a grid. From their safe zones, the French troops would spread out into the countryside and comb each square, looking for pockets of Vietminh resistance. The French objective involved the pacification of these districts by eliminating the rebel activity, square by square.⁷⁵

The French, however, did not have enough troops in Indochina to pacify and occupy every region. They needed a minimum of ten regular soldiers for every Vietminh guerrilla. The French easily seized the cities and major roads, but the enemy merely disappeared into the natural cover of the countryside. Regarding the French strategy, General Vo Nguyen Giap, military commander of the Vietminh forces, said:

General Leclerc . . . estimated that the reoccupation of Vietnam would be a military walk-over. When encountering resistance in the South, the French generals considered it weak and temporary and stuck to their opinion that it would take ten weeks at most to occupy and pacify the whole of South Vietnam. . . . [But] it was not possible for them to understand a fundamental and decisive fact: The Vietnamese Army, although weak materially, was a people's army. . . . In provoking hostilities, the **colonialists** had alienated a whole nation. . . . Unable to grasp this profound truth, the French generals, who believed in an easy victory, went instead to certain defeat.⁷⁶(emphasis added)

Even General Leclerc knew, before the fighting ever began, that the costs of fighting this type of war would be

great. The French military leader told interviewer Paul Mus, "It would take 500,000 men to [defeat the Vietminh], and even then it could not be done." (It is almost ironic that twenty years later, in 1968, the number of U.S. servicemembers stationed in Vietnam exceeded 500,000.) Whereas the French were fighting for pride, to the Vietnamese, the war was one of survival. And the Asians were prepared to make whatever sacrifices necessary to accomplish their primary objective--independence. Nevertheless, the French had no other strategy to use to suppress the insurgency.⁷⁷

The Vietminh strategy followed the guidelines established by Mao Tse Tung for the Chinese revolution. The Vietnamese struggle would occur in three phases. Mao Tse Tung called the first phase "strategic defensive." During this period, the insurgents organize and build their forces, avoiding any direct conflict with the enemy. The insurrectionists must be willing to sacrifice land for time to get ready for a major military engagement with the imperialists.⁶¹

Mao Tse Tung labelled the second stage of the conflict as "strategic stalemate." The rebels continue to build and expand their forces but they also start harassing the enemy through small guerrilla attacks. The final phase of Mao Tse Tung's revolutionary model carried the title "strategic offensive." This stage is also known as "big guerrilla

warfare." This period involves essentially the same type of strategic and tactical procedures of the second phase, but employs them on a large scale with well-armed forces. The goal in the third phase is total destruction of the enemy. Rebel regiments and divisions attack significant enemy installations with their desired result being a major military victory over the enemy.⁷⁹

The common principle in all of Mao Tse Tung's phases is guerrilla warfare. And the key to success in guerrilla warfare rests on popular support. Mao Tse Tung stressed the importance of the relationship between the army and the people. The guerrilla warrior serves as the link between the indigenous population and the revolutionary struggle. He relies on speed, surprise, and maneuver for quick attacks and expeditious withdrawals. He travels light, moves in small groups, and camps a fair distance away from areas of activity such as cross-roads or riverbanks. *Air University Review*, in the Spring 1954 issue, assessed the effect of these tactics. The author concluded that the "cumulative effect of hundreds of quick raids . . . all directed and coordinated at the top of the chain of the command . . . is devastating."⁸⁰

Exploiting the concept of popular support, the ambush quickly became the key to the Vietminh tactics. The population would warn the Vietminh fighters of the impending arrival of French troops and the insurgents could make their

plans accordingly. If necessary, the fighters could simply disappear into the surrounding jungle. But when the opportunity presented itself, the rebels could strike a French convoy practically without warning. It seemed to the French that the Vietminh could be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. To the French, the jungle soon became an enemy, and the night brought constant danger. To the Vietminh, the jungle and the darkness became friends. They offered excellent protection against whatever overwhelming firepower the French could muster.⁸¹

There is one other point that should be made now regarding the type of strategy employed on both sides. As mentioned previously, the French were fighting a war of pride in a small, faraway country to regain the glory of the pre-World War II French empire. National survival had nothing to do with their struggle. The Vietminh, on the other hand, were fighting a war of survival on their own soil. These opposing objectives led each side to fight a different type of war. The French, therefore, fought a limited war against a smaller nation. They did not need to place their economy on a wartime pace, nor did they really need the unswerving support of the French people. But the French needed to keep winning battles, since they measured their success by how much land they controlled. The Vietminh, on the other hand, fought a total war that needed the gross support of the entire population. Victory

or control of a certain plot of land had little impact on their strategy. Time was on their side. As long as they maintained control of the people, victory was inevitable. The sea of popular support, the tactic of the ambush and the concept of time all helped keep alive the Vietnamese insurgency for eight years against overwhelming military odds.⁸²

The French strategy therefore was doomed to failure because the insurgents held the advantage⁵ of terrain, time, and the support of the local population. Although the tactics employed by the Europeans would appear to be offensive, in reality they would be primarily defensive as they tried to stop the Vietminh from gaining substantial victory. The French would continue to control the cities, but would never be able to conquer the countryside, the source of the Vietminh's support.⁸³

The Vietminh would require eight years to defeat the French colonialists but, as described above, they were more than willing to trade time for eventual victory. Years after the Vietminh success against the French and before they encountered American troops in force, General Giap wrote *People's War, People's Army*. The Vietnamese school teacher turned military leader wrote that in order for a guerrilla effort to be successful, the army must

avoid the enemy when he is strong, attack him when he is weak, [and] fight so as to wear down his resistance . . . to attack the enemy everywhere so that he will find himself constantly submerged by a tide of hostile,

heavily-armed men, thus undermining his morale and wear out his strength. . . . Just as an accumulation of gusts of wind constitutes a gale, so the accumulation of victories in minor confrontations gradually wears down the enemy forces.⁸⁴

The war continued for almost four years before the United States became involved. This does not mean, however, that the U.S. policy makers paid absolutely no attention to the conflict, although it was not mentioned too often in official addresses. Several members in the State Department conceded that France faced real problems in Indochina. The Vietminh were prepared to fight for a very long time to achieve independence. Anti-French sentiment ran high in the colony and the Vietminh was "a force to be reckoned with." Analysts believed that the French, therefore, would have a very difficult time trying to reassert and hold control in Southeast Asia. France's difficulties with the war as well as international events would force it to turn to its Cold War ally, the United States, to provide economic and military assistance. The United States had three avenues by which to approach the problem. It could 1) do nothing, 2) help France, or 3) compromise with Ho Chi Minh. U.S. policy, which had started out on the first road, would soon change to option #2.⁸⁵

On January 14, 1950, Ho Chi Minh announced that his Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) constituted the "only legal government of the Vietnam people." He then indicated the willingness of the DRV to establish diplomatic relations

with any country that recognized its status on the basis of "national sovereignty and territory." On January 18, Mao Tse Tung, declared the People Republic of China's recognition of the jurisdiction of the DRV in Indochina. The reasons behind this move are not completely clear. Was this a rhetoric confirmation of Mao's "leaning-towards" the Soviets and the international communist movement? Or was Mao's endorsement more of a response to the White Paper written by U.S. Secretary of State Acheson in January 1949 about the four-year civil war in China? For whatever motivation, the new Chinese leader was behind the Vietminh. Soviet Premier Stalin announced his endorsement of Ho Chi Minh two weeks later.⁸⁶

The French reacted swiftly to Ho Chi Minh's proclamation. On January 29, the French National Assembly voted to make Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia autonomous states within the French Union. They viewed this as a step closer to complete independence for the three Southeast Asia states. Two days later, the French government officially protested the Soviet recognition of the DRV. "By encouraging Ho Chi Minh's insurrectionary movement . . . this [Russian] decision can only make the return of peace to Viet-Nam more difficult. And on February 2, the French Senate ratified the Assembly's measure to transfer limited sovereignty to the Associated States under the leadership of Emperor Bao Dai.⁸⁷

The votes in 1950 in the French Senate and Assembly solidified the Elysee Agreement signed on March 8, 1949. Following a series of negotiations, French President Vincent Auriol had reconfirmed Vietnam's status as an "independent Associated State within the French Union." The "new" Vietnamese state would now formally consist of Cochinchina, Annam, and the Vietminh stronghold of Tonkin. The French had hoped that the emperor might sway popular Vietnamese support, in the north especially, away from Ho Chi Minh. And since the agreements with Bao Dai kept Vietnam under the "control" of Paris officials, the February 1950 decision by French legislators to endorse him was an easy resolution.⁸⁸

The United States also responded to the declaration of the Vietminh leader. On February 1, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson made an official retort to the Soviet actions. He said, "The Soviet acknowledgement of this movement should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina." And in a memorandum to President Truman dated the next day, Acheson explained why the United States should support the French actions. Among them, he included:

- encouragement of national aspirations under non-Communist leadership for peoples of colonial areas in Southeast Asia;
- the establishment of stable non-Communist governments in areas adjacent to Communist China;
- support to a friendly country which is also a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty;
- and as demonstration of displeasure with Communist

tactics which are obviously aimed at eventual domination of Asia.⁸⁹

Acheson also told the Chief Executive that France had practically established Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as self-governing republics under the leadership of Emperor Bao Dai. Truman agreed with Acheson's recommendations. Ho Chi Minh was another pawn of Stalin. The three declarations of the previous month confirmed that. Therefore, on February 3, 1950, he recognized the establishment of the State of Vietnam, and the Kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia as independent states within the French empire. The French conflict in Indochina had now, in the eyes of the United States, become a matter of containing communist aggression in the region.⁹⁰

French leaders feared that they might not be able to continue the war in Southeast Asia without American aid. On February 16, 1950, France formally asked the United States for military and economic assistance. By this time, the French Air Force in Indochina consisted of forty-six British Spitfire and sixty-three American F-63 Kingcobra fighter aircraft. Additionally, they had thirty-five German-made JU-52 and 20 United States C-47 transport aircraft and nine British Supermarine-1 reconnaissance aircraft. They lacked, however, the weaponry for their fighters and bombers and the ammunition for their infantry to perform their respective missions. They desperately needed immediate shipments of munitions, bombs, and napalm, as well as barbed wire to

protect the perimeters of their airbases.⁹¹

Different United States agencies reviewed the French request. At a National Security Council (NSC) meeting on February 27, 1950, the State Department submitted a report labelled NSC-64. It stated that the presence of Communist Chinese soldiers along the border of Vietnam facilitated the free transfer of arms between the Chinese and the Vietminh. The force of native Vietnamese and French could not successfully restrain the insurgents if the communists supplied them with materiel. This would allow Ho Chi Minh's forces to achieve victory in the region. The report concluded by saying the United States must take all practical measures to protect its vital security interests and prevent further communist expansion into Southeast Asia.⁹²

One month later, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) General Omar Bradley submitted his report to President Truman. He stated the importance of Indochina from a military perspective. His paper stressed the strategic value of the area's raw materials and the value the region held as a communications-hub for the entire Western Pacific. Bradley recommended granting as much as \$15 million to the French "at the earliest practicable date." He advised the President, however, that the United States aid should not be granted without any conditions. It should be integrated with other "political and economic

programs." If the United States insisted upon complete independence for Vietnam and the withdrawal of French troops from the area, these actions might improve the political situation. Additionally, the United States could facilitate a speedier resolution to the crisis if the pressure from China were removed. And, the CJCS recommended the need for consultation with the French and British governments regarding further actions in Indochina.⁹³

In General Bradley's memorandum, one sees three themes which will continue to influence United States actions in Southeast Asia during the remainder of the decade. First, he recommended sending aid to the region. The level of American financial commitment to the area would grow throughout the 1950s. Initially, the United States sent it only to the French. Following the fall of Dien Bien Phu, this money then went to the indigenous regime in South Vietnam. Secondly, he advocated complete independence for the Associated States. Eisenhower never wavered on this principle. He would not commit United States troops to Dien Bien Phu to fight France's colonial campaign, despite the importance of the region for strategic, Cold war concerns. Finally, Bradley suggested that the United States consult with other governments. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would continue this theme when he attempted to gain allied support for the Eisenhower administration's "United Action" defense pact for the region.⁹⁴

Another paper would be reviewed and adopted by the National Security Council in the beginning of 1950. This document, labelled NSC-68, called for aggressive *containment* on the part of the United States "to block further expansion of Soviet power." The United States must, by itself, assume the defense of the non-communist world, meeting "each fresh challenge promptly and unequivocally." NSC-68 said the fundamental purpose of the United States revolved around the preservation of a "free society." It contrasted the goals of a free society with those of a society dominated by communism. A free society values freedom and the rights of the individual. A communist society, in its quest for world domination, threatens to destroy those values, both in the United States and abroad. The United States must therefore build-up its military, economic, and political strength to counter the threat posed by the Soviet Union because an attack against the United States was imminent. President Truman adopted this report on September 30, 1950.⁹⁵

NSC-68 reflected the American sentiment at that time towards the Soviet Union. In 1946, a public opinion poll revealed that almost all Americans condemned Russia's post-war behavior in Europe. Of that number, 58 percent believed that the Soviets were trying to become the most powerful country in the world. By October 1947, that number had risen to 78 percent of the American population, with only 18 percent believing that Russia's actions in Eastern Europe

were defensive in nature. And one year later, a survey showed that Americans almost unanimously believed that the Soviet Union had expansionist motives and the United States must somehow stop the spread of communism. Additionally, Americans overwhelming supported the increasing of the United States military arsenal and beginning preparations for possible confrontation with the Russians.⁹⁶

By 1949, almost three-quarters of the American population felt that the President should take a firmer stand on Soviet aggression world-wide. They witnessed the Huk uprising in the Philippines, the Indonesian nationalists against the Dutch, and the British fighting against the communists guerrillas in Malaysia. This accompanied Mao's victory over Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, the Soviet Union's "creation" of the German Democratic Republic ("East Germany") and the Soviet detonation of its own atomic bomb. These events and fears provided part of the impetus for a more activist posture by the Truman Administration in international politics by the end of the 1940s.⁹⁷

NSC-68 reiterated the ideas of George Kennan's "X" article which said America must become the world's policeman. The Cold War had become a reality, and the United States must stop the spread of communism wherever necessary. The tenets outlined in this document would serve as the bulwark for all the United States foreign policy of the Cold War, from the Truman to the Reagan-Bush

administrations. This report did not address the problem of Vietnam directly. It did, however, mention the Soviet Union's desire to consolidate its gains in the "Far East" as a possible course of action available to the communists. This explains why America remained involved in the politics of Southeast Asia for twenty-five years, through six Presidential administrations. NSC-68 would become the catalyst which changed the focus of United States involvement in Vietnam from a colonial concern to a Cold War, containment dilemma.⁹⁸

On May 1, 1950, President Truman agreed to send \$10 million in military assistance to the French. One week later, on May 8, 1950, Secretary of State Acheson announced:

The United States Government, convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism, considers the situation to be such as to warrant its according economic aid and military equipment to the Associated States of Indochina and to France in order to assist them in restoring stability and permitting these states to pursue their peaceful and democratic development.⁹⁹

According to a French newspaper, the sum total of American aid in 1950 amounted to "seven Dakotas, forty Hellcat fighters and three shiploads of light arms." That figure of \$10 million, however, grew over the next few years until the United States financed more than half of the French military expenditures in 1953 and almost eighty percent in 1954.¹⁰⁰

Secretary of State Acheson wrote about the dilemma faced by the Truman administration in his memoirs several years later. The United States had tried to take a "middle

of the road" stance regarding support for the French versus involvement in the conflict in Indochina. On one hand, Truman did not want to appear in support of colonialism and wanted to encourage France to grant independence to the Vietnamese. But on the other, he needed to support a Cold War ally and also could not let that region fall into the communist sphere of control. In *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, Acheson recalled,

As we saw our role in Southeast Asia, it was to help toward solving the colonial-nationalist conflict in a way that would satisfy nationalist aims and minimize the strain on our Western European allies. This meant supporting the French "presence" in the area as a guide and help to the three states in moving toward genuine independence within (for the present, at least) the French Union. It was not an easy role.¹⁰¹

This "[un]easy role" would be encountered once again several years later as the Eisenhower administration pondered whether the United States should intervene militarily at Dien Bien Phu.

During the same year that the United States began sending military aid to the French, the French government actually ordered a cutback in the number of French troops sent to Indochina. The National Assembly ignored the military necessities of the Vietnam conflict and instead yielded to the growing domestic anti-war sentiment. This parliamentary decision ensured that no French conscripts would be sent to Southeast Asia. Only new members to the French Foreign Legion would join other Frenchmen and Legionaries in Indochina. This decision also further

weakened the French war effort against the Vietminh, placing more reliance of American assistance. From this time forward, the United States would debate the level of French commitment to the area.¹⁰²

Following the decision to send financial aid to the area, (and, of course, because of events transpiring in Korea--the linkage between these two conflicts will be discussed in the next chapter) the Truman Administration entered into two mutual defense agreements with the Vietnamese. The United States entered into force the first treaty, the *Agreement for [the] Mutual Defense Assistance in Indochina between the United States of America and Cambodia, France, Laos and Vietnam*, on December 23, 1950. This treaty formalized the sending of United States aid to help the allied war effort in the region. It also allowed the United States to have a say in how these countries used this equipment. The second accord solidified the terms of the exchange of direct military matériel between the United States and Vietnam. It also went a step further, though, to ensure that Vietnam used the aid appropriately to deter communist aggression into the region:

The Government of Vietnam hereby confirms it has agreed to--

- (a) join in promoting international understanding and good will, and maintaining world peace;
- (b) take such action as may be mutually agreed upon to eliminate causes of international tension;
- (c) make . . . the full contribution permitted by its manpower, resources, and facilities . . . [for the] defensive strength of the free world.¹⁰³

President Truman's decision to enter into a treaty directly with Vietnam constituted a definite change in American policy. Despite all of the rhetoric by President Roosevelt during World War II about self-determination for all people, Southeast Asia had traditionally been seen by the United States as belonging in the Dutch, French, and British spheres of interest. The United States had very little bureaucratic expertise in the area. When American policy makers gave any sort of thought to the politics of the Southwest Pacific region, it usually fell into the context of American-European relations. The United States gave virtually little attention to the specific individuals or issues with Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. But these two agreements ensured not only that the United States would send military assistance but remain involved in the politics of Southeast Asia for a long time.¹⁰⁴

Chapter 4:

Changing of the Guard: Truman to Eisenhower

Two important world events also influenced the Truman Administration's decision to place continuing importance on Indochina. As alluded to earlier, in 1949, the Communist Chinese under the leadership of Mao Tse Tung achieved control on Mainland China and expelled the Nationalist Chinese led by Chiang Kai-shek to the island of Formosa. Truman feared that China would become a funnel for Russian weapons to flow to the Vietminh. Less than one year later, in June 1950, communist North Korean soldiers crossed the 38th parallel in an attempt to forcibly unify that peninsular nation under communist rule. In Asia, the United States believed it had to build a "bamboo curtain" to stop the further spread of communism on that continent.¹⁰⁵

The outbreak of the Korean war proved to be an affirmation of the ideas found in NSC-68. In order to become the world's policeman and stop the spread of communism in Asia as well as Europe (Truman's primary concern), the United States had to begin a program of massive rearmament. The price of such action was great, but the need to strengthen its armed forces even greater. While no specific figures had been included in the paper, the State Department estimated that the United States would need

a defense budget of \$35 billion a year. The military, on the other hand, had planned on spending \$18 billion a year. Regardless, in order to meet the increased spending on military materials, an increase in federal taxes had to occur. As world events unfolded over the next three years, federal tax revenue increased from \$36.5 billion in fiscal year (FY) 1950 to \$47.6 billion in FY 1951 to \$61.4 billion in FY 1952. The amount of money spent on national security programs grew from \$22.3 billion in 1950 to \$50.4 billion in FY 1953. To understand how those figures related to the amount of output in the national economy, in 1950, 5.2% of the gross national product was spent on national defense. In 1953, that number had grown to 13.5%. Clearly, a lot more money was now funneled towards defense programs at home and military operations overseas.¹⁰⁶

Although the first three years of the 1950s saw the attention of United States foreign policy makers focused mainly on northeastern Asia, the United States never overlooked the significance of the other communist conflict raging in Indochina. America had to decide between a communist Indochina in the Soviet sphere of influence or a colonial Indochina serving France. The choice was rather easy. The probability of a "Ho Chi Tito," like that of a "Mao Tse Tito," was no longer valid. On the day that Truman ordered American soldiers to Korea, he also announced that the United States would not overlook the French struggle in

Vietnam. America was committed to continue the foreign assistance to the French because, according to Truman:

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that the communists have passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. . . . I have directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of the French and the Associated States of Indochina and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.¹⁰⁷

Truman continued to see a parallel between the on-going conflicts in Korea and in Indochina. In a special message to Congress one month after the out-break of fighting in the peninsular Asian country, Truman reiterated how the confrontation in Korea "requires us to consider its implications for peace throughout the world." The United States had to realize that additional armed aggression may take place in other parts of the world. Additionally, it must increase the amount of aid to the French in Southeast Asia. The nations of the free world had to "make it clear" that such aggression would be met with force. "We are fighting for liberty and for peace." Although hoping that France would allow the Vietnamese to have a greater amount of self-rule in Indochina, Truman never made that a pre-condition to receive aid from the United States. The issue in Asia was now one of containing the spread of communism, not ending colonial rule.¹⁰⁸

As Truman likened the fight in Korea to other Asian struggles against communist advancement, so too did the Asian communist leaders. On June 28, communist Chinese

Foreign Minister Chou En-Lai called the deployment of the U.S. Navy 7th Fleet to the straits of Taiwan an act of aggression against the Chinese. He continued saying that the American actions were a pretext for future United States invasions of Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. On July 4, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko said the United States had directed "acts of aggression" in several countries in Asia, including Korea and Vietnam. And Ho Chi Minh, on July 25, said that United States "imperialists" are attempting to "discard the French colonialists so as to gain complete control over Indo-China." However, the Vietnamese were prepared to fight the French as well as the Americans until they defeated the imperialists. "We are still labouring under great difficulties but victory will certainly be ours."¹⁰⁹

While world attention remained focused on the conflict in Korea, the Truman administration committed increasing quantities of matériel to bolster what now looked like "a parallel struggle against 'Communist aggression' in Asia." Between 1950 and 1954, the United States would send 1,880 tanks and other combat vehicles, 5,045 artillery pieces, and 361,522 small arms along with a extravagant amount of ammunition to help the French ground campaign. The French navy received an aircraft carrier and 438 small patrol boats and landing ships. America sent the French Air Force 394 fighter, bomber, and cargo aircraft. Additionally, the

United States "lent" the French another carrier, a third bomber squadron, and 24 C-119 transport aircraft. The American commitment in Indochina was going to be no small affair.¹¹⁰

Despite the large amount of military and economic assistance that the United States sent during the Korean War to help the French, American officials truly did not want to send troops to the Indochina conflict. This sentiment was expressed during a National Security Council meeting on October 11, 1950. The political assembly reiterated the importance of the French effort to worldwide efforts to contain the spread of communism further into Asia. But, they concluded that regardless of the amount of aid sent to help the French, "the United States will not commit any of its armed forces to the defense of Indochina against overt, foreign aggression." Although the United States expressed a great amount of concern for the Southeast Asia crisis, the President would not send American troops to die for France's colonial aspirations. This remained Truman's policy for the remainder of his tenure in the Oval Office.¹¹¹

In an annex to NSC-124, dated February 13, 1952, the National Security Council adopted a paper entitled "United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia" that listed the probable consequences of a communist victory in Indochina. The NSC believed that if Communist China interceded on the behalf of the Vietminh,

the United States would take necessary military actions as part of a United Nations force. However, the report strongly discouraged the United States from acting unilaterally in the region. In addition, the United States should continue to support the French military effort in Indochina and oppose any plans of a withdrawal of their forces without a military armistice. Regarding this report historian George Herring writes:

The fall of China aroused grave fears for the security of the adjoining areas, and the establishment of close ties between China and the Vietminh significantly aroused the threat to Indochina. . . . Top U.S. officials were certain that the loss of Indochina would cause the loss of all of Southeast Asia.¹¹²

Truman passed on these problems in Korea and Indochina to General-of-the-Army Dwight Eisenhower when he became President and Commander-in-Chief in 1953.

Even before he assumed the country's highest elected position, Eisenhower expressed concern for the French predicament in Indochina. In a 1951 diary entry, while serving as the first supreme allied commander of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, Eisenhower wrote:

The French have a knotty problem on that one [Indochina]. . . . [I]f they quit and Indochina falls to Commies, it is easily possible that the entire Southeast Asia and Indonesia will go. . . . That prospect makes the whole problem one of interest to us all. I'd favor reinforcement to get the thing over at once; but I'm convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater.¹¹³

Eisenhower's trepidation about the situation centered

on France's colonial motivation in the region. He believed that the French would have an easier time getting support from their allies if they pledged to accord independence and the "right of self-determination" to Indochina as soon as they attained military victory. This promise would also increase the morale of the loyal Vietnamese soldiers. The French, however, would not make such a vow because of possible threats to their reputation in other parts of the French Union. Eisenhower noted:

In absence of such a [pledge], the war was naturally looked upon as a domestic difficulty between France and one part of her empire. This attitude precluded the possibility that other free nations could help in what the French themselves considered so much a family quarrel that it could not even be submitted to the United Nations for adjudication.¹¹⁴

Looking at the conflict in Indochina, Eisenhower wanted to get rid of the "millstone" of colonialism that was influencing both French and American foreign policy.¹¹⁵

General Eisenhower, like General Ulysses S. Grant, had a status that transcended traditional party lines. His popularity came from his military record as the supreme commander of the allied armies in Europe during World War II. Because of his military position, he had a vast amount of experience in international affairs and dealing with European leaders. His managerial skills and diplomacy during and after the war had been a major influence in maintaining allied unity and cooperation.

Eisenhower was far from being a career politician.

Soon after being appointed to his post in Europe, he wrote that he resented people who "played politics" with important issues. He became very upset with politics affecting U.S. policy when Congress failed to approve the deployment of U.S. troops to support NATO. (Truman then had to send the troops to Europe without Congressional authority.)

Nevertheless, the General reluctantly entered the presidential race in January 1952 when several Republican senators launched a "Draft Eisenhower" campaign while he was still on active-duty in Europe. He returned from Europe in June and later won the nomination on the second ballot in August, defeating Ohio Senator Robert Taft.¹¹⁶

The Republican party foreign policy platform, drafted by John Foster Dulles, rejected the Truman doctrine of containment. The document defined that policy as "negative, futile, and immoral." Eisenhower, because of his experience as commander of NATO forces, believed otherwise. He did agree, however, with the concept of "collective security," and the establishment of foreign commitments as long as they best served the interests of the United States.

Eisenhower's skill at practicing "coalition politics" helped him walk the fine line between the conservatives in his party who wanted to liberate the subjugated peoples from the yoke of Soviet tyranny and the more moderates who still maintained that containment constituted the best way to stop global Soviet aggression.¹¹⁷

In November 1952, Eisenhower soundly defeated his Democratic opponent, Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson. Following the election, the President-elect met with his out-going counterpart on November 18, 1952 to facilitate an orderly transfer of governmental power. At that meeting, Truman and Acheson briefed select members of the new administration on the current world situation. After a discussion of activities in Korea and Europe, they turned to the French struggle in Indochina.

Truman related that the French, fed up with fighting for so many years, now seemed to lack the offensive spirit needed for success. Additionally, Truman reported how domestic opinion in France was turning against the war and pressuring the government to negotiate a truce. He impressed on Eisenhower the importance of keeping the area out of the control of the communists. Truman concluded by saying, "This is an urgent matter upon which the new administration must be prepared to act." Although not recorded, there should be little doubt that Truman referred to the tenets of NSC-68 in his analysis of the value of Southeast Asia. Eisenhower responded that he would not only "continue but strengthen the Truman's administration's opposition to communism in Indochina."¹¹⁸

On the east steps of the United States Capitol, Chief Justice Fred Vinson swore in Dwight D. Eisenhower as America's thirty-fourth President on January 20, 1953. The

new Chief Executive's inauguration speech included the same hard-line anti-communist rhetoric begun under his predecessor. He compared the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as a contest between those who acted on faith and those who acted on force. He drew a parallel between the British fight in Malaya, the French struggle in Indochina, and the U.S.-led contest in Korea, all crises which pitted free-world soldiers against Soviet "purveyors of darkness." He said that the world looked to the United States to lead them into the light of "freedom and peace."

How far have we come in man's long pilgrimage from darkness toward light? Are we nearing the light--a day of freedom and of peace for all mankind? Or are the shadows of another night closing in upon us? . . . Freedom is pitted against slavery, lightness against the dark. . . . Destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world's leadership. We face the threat [of Soviet darkness]--not with dread and confusion--but with confidence and conviction.¹¹⁹

Eisenhower then described nine "rules of conduct" he felt the free world should follow. He included in this list an anti-colonialist principle which vaguely resembled the tenets of the Atlantic Charter agreement signed by Roosevelt and Churchill a decade previously. He said, "We hold all continents and people in regard and honor. We reject any insinuation that one race or another, one people or another, is in any sense inferior." He concluded his oration with the prophesy that "History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak and timid." The Indochina crisis that

loomed on the horizon contained elements of both colonialism and containment. But before he could act in that part of the world, Eisenhower had another problem which demanded his immediate attention.¹²⁰

One of the reasons the American people had elected the Republican candidate was the General's pledge of going to Korea and end that conflict expeditiously. The fighting between the communist-backed North Korean forces and the United Nations troops had stabilized along the 38th parallel. The peace talks had been on again and off again since July 1951. Meanwhile, the number of casualties had continued to rise. The American people wanted to see the war concluded and the safe return of the American soldiers to U.S. soil as quickly as possible.

Eisenhower originally supported Truman's decisions to send troops to Korea to make a stand against the communist aggressors. In fact, he told an interviewer that he believed a connection existed between the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe and the start of the Korean war. "It was time, I think, [that] the Soviets felt they had to create a diversion." Truman and his advisors agreed with Eisenhower that the North Korean advance across the border was a feint by the Soviets to draw attention and military hardware away from Europe. Then, while the United States focused on Asia, the Red Army would move westward and engage the numerically-inferior NATO troops.¹²¹

But when no simultaneous attack occurred in Europe, Eisenhower, like other average American citizens, had become frustrated in the lack of military progress in Asia and the questionable motives of the South Korean leader.

It has been a long and bitter experience, and I am certain in my own mind that except for the fact that evacuation of South Korea would badly expose Japan, the majority of the United Nations now fighting there would have long since attempted to pull out. . . . Of course the fact remains that the probable enemy is the Communists, but [Syngman] Rhee has been such an unsatisfactory ally that it is difficult indeed to avoid excoriating him in the strongest of terms.¹²²

The President-elect visited Korea shortly after the election, and accompanying him were some of his future advisors: John Foster Dulles, Charles Wilson, and Admiral Arthur Radford. Then, in the spring of 1953, Eisenhower communicated to China through diplomatic connections in India and Korea that, although he did not want to initiate a world war, he would consider using atomic weapons in Manchuria to accelerate the peace talks. Whether or not the communist Chinese believed this message was credible, the talks resumed. Less than six months after his inauguration, Eisenhower achieved his promise of ending the war when members of the United Nations signed an armistice in Panmunjom on July 27, 1953. The new Chief Executive then turned to other international dilemmas, including the continuing crisis in Indochina.¹²³

One last comment should be made regarding the threat to use atomic weapons in China. Not only did Eisenhower

believe that the Chinese could do little to react to an atomic attack, he also felt that there was a minimal risk of Soviet retaliation because of the death of Soviet Marshall Joseph Stalin in March 1953. He speculated that there was probably so much confusion in the Kremlin while Stalin's deputies maneuvered to become his successor that there was practically no way they could or would respond to American actions in one of their satellite countries. In his memoirs, Eisenhower later wrote that "[f]or the moment, they [the communist leaders] were more anxious about individual survival and position than about Soviet long-term policy and foreign relations." America never employed atomic weapons in Korea or China. But, as will be discussed later, the use of these weapons would again be considered. In that debate, their targets would be in Indochina.¹²⁴

The death of Stalin also had opened a new door for United States-Soviet Union foreign relations. Eisenhower believed that a mutual understanding between the two superpowers might now be possible, due to the change in Kremlin leadership. Even before the Korean war armistice had been signed, the United States Chief Executive expressed those sentiments in an April 1953 speech entitled "A Chance for Peace" where he offered an olive leaf but he held it in a clenched fist:

No nation's security and well-being can be lastingly achieved in isolation but only in effective cooperation with fellow nations. . . . Any nation's attempt to dictate to other nations their form of government is

"untenable". . . . The road of the Soviet Union was found in force, security was sought by denying it to others. . . . The worst fear [of the U.S.] is an atomic war, the best is a life of perpetual fear and tension. . . . [Now we face] new Soviet leadership with new ideas toward . . . Southeast Asia. . . . We seek throughout Asia and through the world a peace that is total. . . . These proposals spring without ulterior purpose or political passion, but from our calm conviction that hunger for just peace is in the hearts of all people.¹²⁵

Eisenhower juxtaposed two conflicting ideas in this momentous address. On the one hand, he offered to the new leadership in the Kremlin an invitation to work with the West to move towards global peace. "The peace we seek . . . can be fortified, not by weapons of war but by wheat and by cotton." On the other, in keeping with the precepts of NSC-68 to contain the spread of communism throughout the world, he illustrated his desire to cooperate with other nations to accomplish this endeavor. "I know of only one question upon which progress waits. It is this: *What Is the Soviet Union Ready to Do?*" Until that question was answered, the United States would maintain a strong military posture. But by employing "effective cooperation with fellow nations," U.S. interests in areas such as Indochina could be maintained without having to commit a large contingent of American forces to regional conflicts. This would ensure U.S. soldiers would not have to fight to support the colonial aspirations of certain European countries.¹²⁶

The National Security Council further outlined these ideas a few months later. Its recommendations were adopted

in NSC-162/1. This report stressed that:

our allies must be genuinely convinced that our strategy is one of collective security. . . . Cooperative efforts . . . will continue to be necessary to build . . . the stability of the free world. . . . The strength and cohesion of the coalition depends . . . upon the assumption of each coalition member of a proper share of responsibility."¹²⁷

There was a new president in the White House. There would be new leadership in the Soviet Union. The Korean War had ended after three years of fighting. There were other international problems that needed to be resolved. Included on that agenda was the crisis in Indochina. Was the solution to the conflict Operation Vulture, the military proposal preferred by the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Admiral Arthur Radford? Would U.S. troops need to be deployed to the area, as warned by the new Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgway? Was the answer United Action, where the United States intervened in Indochina with the assistance of other nations? This option would be pursued by the new Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. The decisions reached in 1953 and 1954 regarding Indochina would include some of these propositions, as well as Eisenhower's anti-colonialism ideas and his Cold War concerns regarding America's ability to contain the spread of communism into the region.¹²⁸

Chapter 5:

Eisenhower and the Establishment of Dien Bien Phu

The year 1953 also brought a major change in French strategy in Indochina. On May 19, the French government appointed General Henri Navarre as the new commander-in-chief of the French Union expeditionary forces in the Associated States. The new general came to Indochina with an extensive background of combat experience. He had led an armored unit that had spearheaded the French attack into Germany in 1945. Navarre next had commanded the military division of Constantine, Algeria from 1948 to 1950. In his last assignment prior to leaving for Vietnam, he had headed the French Fifth Armored Division in Germany. Although he had never been in Indochina, he hoped to bring a fresh perspective to the crisis.¹²⁹

Navarre believed that "one can only win by attacking." He hoped to increase the number of French troops in the area to 250,000 while advisors trained enough indigenous Vietnamese to raise their total to 330,000. This combined force would more than outnumber the estimated 400,000 insurgents. He preferred to avoid a major military confrontation with the enemy until October 1954. By that time, these new soldiers would be ready for battle. The French forces would then draw the rebels into open battle

and handily defeat them by the summer of 1955. The French requested an additional 150 billion francs (\$400 million) in military aid from the United States to support this new strategy during the next fiscal year.¹³⁰

Despite the supposed offensive mind-set that General Navarre brought to the Indochina conflict, few in Paris, Saigon, or Hanoi thought that the French could win this colonial conflict that had lasted for seven years. In fact, the mission that French officials had charged their new Indochina military commander with was no longer to win the war. Instead, they hoped the French general would strengthen France's military position so that they would have an advantage in negotiations with the Vietminh for a settlement in the region. This "defeatist attitude" would loom over French operations in Indochina for the next year.¹³¹

During the NSC meeting on August 6, Secretary Dulles presented a State Department report that supported the new French plan. The paper cited that the Laniel government had been the first French administration in seven years that seemed capable of achieving success in Indochina as well as strengthening France's position in Western Europe. The document also included the French promise to grant independence to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Dulles concluded that he believed that this military and political strategy could produce favorable results "in eighteen months

to two years" if the French pursued it wisely.¹³²

Eisenhower concurred with the recommendations of the State Department report. He felt that any increase of United States funding to the French effort in Indochina depended on three stipulations. He included in this list a "public French commitment to 'a program which will insure the support and cooperation of the native Indochina.'" The requested additional \$385 million earmarked for the Navarre plan meant that the United States would give France \$785 million in economic and military aid in fiscal year 1954 and planned to send another \$1.13 billion in fiscal year 1955. When Congress authorized the additional funding, the President instructed the American ambassador to inform the Premier that the United States expected the French to "pursue a policy of perfecting independence of [the] Associated States."¹³³

As America became more involved in the affairs of Indochina, Eisenhower tried to clear any misnomer that the United States was supporting France's colonial ambitions. During a speech to the Governors conference in Seattle, Washington on August 4, 1953, he defended his decision to increase the amount of financial aid sent to help the French:

Now let us assume that we lose Indochina. If Indochina goes, several things happen right away. The Malayan peninsula . . . would be scarcely defensible--and the tin and tungsten that we so greatly value from that area would cease coming. But all India would be outflanked. Burma would certainly, in its weakened

condition, be no defense. . . . All of that weakening position around there is very ominous for the United States. . . . [S]omewhere along the line, this must be blocked. It must be blocked now. That is what the French are doing.¹³⁴

One sees traces of Eisenhower's "domino theory" already forming in his addresses. However, he had still to determine how to stop the Vietnam domino from falling without the United States getting drawn into a colonial conflict in Indochina.

Many U.S. policy makers felt that the official end of the Korean war meant that the Communist Chinese would now be able to devote more time and give more support to the Vietminh. One month after Eisenhower's address to the governors, Dulles addressed the American Legion on September 2, 1953. His speech on September 2, 1953 centered on the U.S. concern about Chinese intervention in Vietnam, and the changing of the nature of the conflict from a colonial issue to a Cold War concern. The Secretary said that Indochina must no longer be thought as a French colony but a region of vital interest to the United States. The risk existed that the Chinese might send an army to Vietnam to assist the Vietminh. But Dulles warned that such action "could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina." Dulles concluded his speech saying the United States wants "an end of aggression and restoration of peace in Indochina, as well as in Korea." Whether aggression could be stopped in Southeast Asia and a peaceful

resolution obtained, possibly along similar lines of the Korean truce, remained a major question posed to the NSC and the JCS for a long time. Meanwhile, these organizations had to determine the feasibility of the revised French strategy in the region.¹³⁵

While the State Department fully supported General Navarre's new strategy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) gave it a less rousing endorsement. On August 28, 1953, Admiral Radford sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson describing the opinions of the JCS about the French plan. Radford wrote that based on the past performance of the French, the JCS had serious reservations with the new strategy and its chances of bringing success to the French. The chiefs asserted that the French had not pursued past strategy "as vigorously as expected." And they urged the French government to employ this new plan to the maximum extent of their military capabilities. The JCS concern for the new operation would increase considerably after Navarre decided to send thousands of French Union troops to defend an isolated fort in a remote section of the country.¹³⁶

The French controlled most of the major cities in Vietnam, but the insurgents had a firm grasp on the countryside. Navarre decided to attack a Vietminh stronghold in the district of Tonkin in northwest Vietnam at a place called Dien Bien Phu. The name meant "large administrative center on the frontier." The valley

contained about eighty small villages populated by 25,000 Thai inhabitants. It served as a launching-point for the Vietminh to spread their operations into Laos. It also contained an airstrip that the French hoped to use to conduct air operations against the rebels hidden in other parts of the Tonkin region.¹³⁷

The French lost control of the Dien Bien Phu site in December 1952. Although the loss of the post had seemed relatively insignificant, as noted previously, the Vietminh now had an "open-door" to attack French positions in Laos. In a top-secret memo exactly one month after the loss of the location to the communists, French General Raoul Salan, General Navarre's predecessor, ordered a counterattack into the region on January 10, 1953. "The reoccupation of Dien Bien Phu must constitute . . . the first step for the regaining of control of the Thai country and for the elimination of the Vietminh from the area."¹³⁸

General Salan understood that such an operation would require a large number of troops. Because of missions elsewhere in Indochina, he never could assemble enough forces necessary to accomplish such a task. Nevertheless, the concept of using Dien Bien Phu as a strategic staging base into the Tonkin hills, covering Laos and threatening the Vietminh's rear areas, remained strong. Prior to his departure from Vietnam, Salan reiterated the importance of that particular region to his civilian superiors in Paris.

His successor, General Navarre, started making plans for such a daring operation soon after his arrival in the Indochina.¹³⁹

Navarre decided to begin Operation "Castor," ("Beaver"), his plan to recapture Dien Bien Phu, on November 20, 1953. On that day, an armada of sixty-five C-47 cargo planes released 1,220 paratroopers into the Tonkin valley at Dien Bien Phu. Navarre ordered them to build a massive fort to provide protection from the anticipated rebel attacks. He chose to recapture this area, ten miles east of the Laotian border, for three reasons. First, he wanted to prevent the Vietminh from organizing guerrilla strikes into the Red River Delta near Hanoi and Haiphong.¹⁴⁰

Second, Navarre hoped to cut the road leading to the border of Laos. The Vietminh had attacked French outposts in this country earlier that year and Navarre wished to stop further infiltration into that area. Additionally, the French had recently signed a treaty of friendship with the Laotian government. He believed that the loss of that country would have damaging psychological effects on the other two Associated States. Navarre agreed fully with French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault that Laos must be defended.¹⁴¹

Third and finally, Navarre wanted to make in-roads into an area of Vietminh control. This action would assure him of his much-desired open battle with the enemy. Navarre

believed that the Chinese Communists would not supply the Vietminh with long-range artillery. Even if the insurgents did receive the weaponry, they did not have the means necessary to move the heavy pieces into the mountains which surrounded the fortress. Navarre believed that his highly-trained paratroopers with their modern equipment would easily subdue any sort of resistance the Vietminh could muster in the area.¹⁴²

Those sentiments of French military prowess were not just present at the general-staff level. David Halberstam, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, recalled a story about a friend of his who visited the French outpost just prior to outbreak of fighting. Halberstam's friend had an uneasy feeling because the fort was in a valley and he knew that the first rule in warfare was "to take the higher ground." He pointed to the surrounding hills and asked a French officer "Who has the peaks?" The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders and said, "Who knows?" According to Halberstam's friend, the officer's nonchalant attitude indicated he knew the Vietminh held the hills but it was no threat to the French citadel.

The American asked the French officer, "But what if they are there and they have artillery?" To this, the officer replied, "They do not have artillery, and even if they did, they would not know how to use it." As the French would find out, the Vietminh were in the hills, they did

have artillery, and, with the help of Communist Chinese advisors, they would have deadly accuracy when they employed their weapons.¹⁴³

In November, however, the first French to land in the area meet opposition from any artillery. And because of the tireless efforts of these paratroopers, small aircraft could use the airstrip two days after the initial jump. A week later, all sizes of French planes could land at that location. By this time also, the French forces had reached their pre-planned level of strength. 4,500 French troops now occupied the area. On November 30, Navarre relayed his orders for the detachment at Dien Bien Phu. The paratroopers must: "guarantee free use of the airfield, hold this position to the last man, and retard buildup of Vietminh forces by powerful attacks out of the Dien Bien Phu base."¹⁴⁴

Navarre never intended for his troops to occupy the fort on a permanent basis. As mentioned previously, he wanted the base to be a staging area for other offensive operations "in all directions to seek out the enemy and engage him." But the location he chose to build this temporary citadel contained two major military flaws. First, because Navarre placed the fort in a valley completely surrounded by large mountains, during a battle the French could resupply their forces only through the use of an "aerial bridge." This air-connection, which started

220 miles away in Hanoi, took over three hours for cargo planes to fly. By mid-January 1954, the French Air Force required twenty C-119 and fifty C-47 missions dedicated daily to keep the out-post supplied. This number increased as the number of troops at the fort continued to grow.¹⁴⁵

Navarre's subordinates warned him of this pitfall and expressed their consternation about building a fort so far away from French supply lines, let alone in a narrow valley. They questioned whether any possibility of success for the operation existed. In a memorandum submitted on November 4, two weeks prior to Operation Castor, the deputy commanders passionately relayed this opposition to their commander-in-chief.

It seems that to the general staff, the occupation of Dien Bien Phu will close the road [to Laos] and deprive the Vietminh of the rice of the region. In that kind of country you can't interdict a road. This is a European-type notion. . . . The Viets can get through anywhere. [We] are persuaded that Dien Bien Phu shall become, whether we like it or not, a battalion meat-grinder. . . . The consequences of such a decision can be extremely grave and [the General] must know this.¹⁴⁶

Navarre asked his deputies if the *possibility* existed for the Air Force to resupply the fortress so that the ground forces could continue their fight against the Vietminh. They responded that it was possible to supply the fort. But they warned him that the probability of successful air drops during actual hostilities was minimal. This left the ground troops fighting against overwhelming numbers of enemy forces in a losing effort without any means

of resupply. The French commander, nonetheless, proceeded with the construction of the frontier-fortress. And, for the time being, the French deputies had to learn to adapt and overcome those difficulties.¹⁴⁷

The second problem centered on how Navarre set up the fortress. Dien Bien Phu actually consisted on one major fortress and one satellite fortress. Navarre surrounded the command bunkers in the main complex with four subsections. He called these areas Dominique, Elaine, Claudine, and Huguette. Then he established three heavily fortified outposts. He placed Beatrice to the northeast of the command compound, Gabrielle directly to the north, and Anne-Marie to the northwest. Navarre then placed a smaller redoubt, named Isabelle, seven kilometers (four miles) to the south of the main fort. Despite deploying to the fort twelve batteries of infantry, artillery consisting of 75-, 105-, and 155-millimeter guns, and ten tanks, the French could not concentrate nor easily coordinate the firepower because he had split his camp into two areas. This meant that the Vietminh positions proved largely impervious to the French artillery.¹⁴⁸

When questioned later why he placed his defenses at Dien Bien Phu in such a way, Navarre responded:

We knew that a large number of [enemy] artillery and AA gun emplacements had been prepared, but their camouflage [sic] had been so perfect that only a small number of them had been located prior to the beginning of the attacks. . . . The Vietminh command had used processes quite different from the classical methods. . . . It

was the major surprise of the battle.¹⁴⁹

Reliance on the "aerial bridge," an underestimation of the abilities of the Vietminh to move heavy equipment into the hills surrounding the citadel, and an inability to adapt to the enemy's unconventional methods of fighting would all contribute to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

While the French forces built the fortress at Dien Bien Phu, the war-of-words between the Europeans and the Asians continued in earnest. A journalist from the Swedish newspaper, *Espressen*, interviewed Ho Chi Minh on November 29, 1953. When asked if he supported a diplomatic settlement to the crisis through direct negotiations between the French and Vietnamese, the Vietminh leader responded, "if the French Government . . . want[s] to negotiate an armistice in Viet Nam and to solve the Viet Nam problem by peaceful means . . . the Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam are [sic] ready to meet this desire." French Prime Minister Laniel immediately assured President Eisenhower that Ho Chi Minh's responses were mere propaganda. Laniel maintained complete confidence in Navarre's plan and would not consider negotiations with the Vietminh until the French had established a position of military strength in Indochina.¹⁵⁰

On December 19, 1953, the seventh anniversary of the start of open hostilities in Indochina, Ho Chi Minh again engaged in psychological warfare. Via a radio address, he

made another offer to talk with the French about a cease-fire:

Because the French colonialists are dragging on their aggressive war, the Vietnamese people are determined to fight still harder in order to wipe out more enemy forces. . . . However, if the French Government wants to reach a cease-fire in Viet Nam by means of negotiation and to solve the Vietnamese problem by peaceful means, the Vietnamese people and Government are ready to negotiate with it.¹⁵¹

Ho Chi Minh's appeal went unanswered by the French. Their Foreign Office stated that the French did not answer peace proposals "in the want ads." They instead continued to fortify their valley fortress at Dien Bien Phu. The only response of any kind from the West to Ho Chi Minh's oration came in the form of a radio address by Vice President Nixon on December 23.

Many of you ask this question: Why is the United States spending hundreds of millions of dollars supporting the forces of the French Union . . . in Indochina. . . ? If Indochina falls, Thailand is put in an almost impossible position. The same is true of Malaya. . . . The same is true of Indonesia. That indicates to you and to all of us why it is vitally important that Indochina not go behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁵²

Many in France as well as the United States believed that a major battle would occur in the next year. At the NSC meeting on the same day as Nixon's remarks, Eisenhower said he believed the repercussions of what might happen in Indochina far out-weighed what did happen in Korea, from the standpoint of strategic issues in Europe and the rest of the world. He felt the West must somehow convince the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians, that their situation

will worsen if the French leave and the communists take over. Eisenhower knew he would have to find a way to stop Vietnam from going "behind the Iron Curtain" without unilaterally committing American troops to fight in a war which had the sole purpose of preserving the colonial empire of a European nation.¹⁵³

Chapter 6:

Admiral Radford and Operation Vulture

President Eisenhower met with Republican Congressional leaders on January 4, 1954 to review his up-coming State-of-the-Union speech. He read a passage petitioning the legislature to authorize continued military assistance to France. One senator asked if this could mean actually sending men to Indochina. Eisenhower strongly responded "No," and changed the wording to "material assistance." The final draft of the oration that Eisenhower delivered on January 8, 1954 read:

Communist aggression, halted in Korea, continues to meet in Indochina the vigorous resistance of France, and the Associated States, assisted by timely aid from our country. . . . American freedom is threatened so long as the world communist conspiracy exists in its present scope, power and hostility. In the unity of the free world lies our best chance to reduce the communist threat without war. . . . I shall ask the Congress to authorize continued material assistance to hasten the successful conclusion of the struggle in Indochina.¹⁵⁴

During his speech, the President made no mention of sending any American military forces to the region. He would keep this position throughout the crisis at Dien Bien Phu, despite pressure from certain Cabinet members to do otherwise.

Eisenhower's address to Congress followed two diplomatic dispatches predicting favorable results for the

French in Indochina. On January 3, 1954, the American Ambassador in Saigon sent a message to the State Department saying that General Navarre believed a loss at Dien Bien Phu would not prevent his achieving eventual victory in Vietnam. One day later, the Charge' in France sent word that "foreign office officials expressed confidence today regarding the ultimate success of the French Union military forces in Indochina." At the NSC meeting on January 8, Allen Dulles, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), reported that three Vietminh divisions surrounded Dien Bien Phu. He admitted that the CIA could not yet determine if these forces would attack the fortress directly or bypass it on their way to Laos. While the presence of those divisions posed no immediate danger to the forces there, the situation was "somewhat disturb[ing]" to the French.¹⁵⁵

Chairman of the JCS Admiral Radford suggested that the United States should consider sending American pilots "trained to suppress antiaircraft weapons" to end the standoff at the fort. Eisenhower, however, doubted the effectiveness of the airstrikes because of the topography in the region:

There [are] grave doubts in my mind about the effectiveness of such air strikes on deployed troops where good cover [is] plentiful. Employment of air strikes alone to support French forces in the jungle would create a double jeopardy: it would comprise an act of war and would also entail the risk of having intervened and lost. Air power might be temporarily beneficial to French morale, but I have no intention of using United States forces in any limited action when the force employed would probably not be decisively

effective.¹⁵⁶

Eisenhower again voiced his opposition to sending ground troops to Indochina. The French could win this war by getting the Vietminh to fight, but that did not mean replacing the French troops with U.S. soldiers. He concluded the discussion with a prophecy concerning the military effort by the United States in Vietnam that would haunt his four successors for the next quarter of a century. "If we do so [replace French troops with American forces], the Vietminh could be expected to transfer their hatred of the French on us. . . . *This war in Vietnam would absorb our troops by divisions.*"¹⁵⁷(emphasis added)

At the NSC meeting on January 14, CIA Director Dulles reported that "despite everything we do [in Indochina] there remained the possibility that the French position might collapse." His brother, Secretary Dulles responded that this would mean ultimate victory for the communists in Vietnam. He said that the NSC should consider helping the French achieve military victory instead of developing plans about what to do if they withdrew. Of course, the worst possible scenario would be if a combined Vietminh-Communist Chinese force defeated the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. How would the United States respond if that happened?¹⁵⁸

The Council then adopted a Planning Board study of U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia, labelled NSC-5405. Admiral Radford said this report would serve as the "charter for

U.S. action in the months to come, assuming the French fought on." This document "reaffirmed that the United States would furnish the French all aid short of actual military participation and would even consider direct military support if the Chinese intervened." The first French request after the passage of NSC-5405 came one day later when the U.S. Charge' in Paris dispatched a cable relaying a petition for the United States to send more aircraft to Indochina.¹⁵⁹

On January 18, 1954, Eisenhower called for the formation of the Special Committee on Indochina, comprised of the heads of the CIA, Department of Defense (DoD), Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the Department of State. The President charged this commission with generating an analysis on the problem and developing an appropriate U.S. plan of action. The continued Cold War in Europe, the loss of China to the communists, and the three-year stalemate in Korea made Eisenhower believe that another communist success in Indochina was not acceptable. The President told this *ad hoc* group to consider:

- 1) If the defeat of Indochina could be a prelude to greater disaster in Southeast Asia;
- 2) If an additional \$800 million in aid to the French would help the war effort substantially;
- 3) Was victory in the region dependent on the actions of the indigenous Vietnamese loyalists;
- 4) Was the training being conducted by the French producing the necessary results of preparing the Vietnamese to assume a greater role in an anti-insurgency role.¹⁶⁰

The committee met on January 29, 1954 and discussed

Eisenhower's directives and the French request for more aircraft. Following heated discussions, they agreed to send 22 more B-26 medium bombers and 200 Air Force mechanics to the region--a military addendum to a political dilemma. The committee stipulated that the mechanics could only serve at "bases where they would be secure from capture and not be exposed to combat." Eisenhower sent the men and matériel to Indochina under the codename of "Operation Revere" in the middle of February 1954. He stipulated to the French that this cadre must leave the region no later than June 15. At a press conference on February 10, a journalist asked if his sending of mechanics to Vietnam would lead to further United States involvement. Eisenhower responded

no one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am; consequently, every move that I authorize is calculated . . . to make certain that does not happen.¹⁶¹

Eisenhower did not agree to send the military aid without expecting some sort of diplomatic reciprocity on the part of the colonizers. He hoped that the French leaders would ratify the European Defense Community (EDC) agreement as a "quid pro quo for American aid." The United States believed that only by combining all of the military strength of the countries of Western Europe could that region fend off a surprise attack by the numerically-superior Soviet Red Army. Eisenhower wanted to include Germany in the pact. The "Germany" he referred to meant all of that country, not

"a truncated version." Secretary Dulles vehemently pushed for the pact's ratification, saying France posed "the greatest single obstacle to getting the [EDC] going." He, like Eisenhower, believed that the EDC provided the best defense against a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Ratification of the pact would also allow the United States to reduce its number of ground troops in Europe.¹⁶²

The French argued that the treaty called for the rearming of Germany too soon after the end of World War II. Because of events from the prior decade, they did not view a renewed German military build-up on their border enthusiastically. Additionally, the French National Assembly argued that a possible commitment to the European Army prevented them from placing a larger number of troops in Indochina. But the North Korean attack into South Korea raised fears in Europe that the same type of incident could occur between East and West Germany. For this reason, France agreed to sign the treaty in May 1952.

President Eisenhower expressed concern, though, since the French still had not ratified the agreement. The French replied they would consider ratification of EDC if the United States increased their assistance to Indochina. Eisenhower and Dulles hoped that this increased U.S. aid would help the French achieve victory in Asia and push them to adopt the pact for Europe.¹⁶³

Foreign Ministers from the United States, France,

England, and the Soviet Union, convened in Berlin on January 25, 1954 for a dialogue of international affairs. Eisenhower recalled that the envoys had not set a clear agenda for the meeting except for a discussion of Germany and the Far East. The Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov wasted no time in pushing for a "Big Five" conference in Geneva--to include a Communist Chinese delegate--to discuss the situations in Korea and Indochina. Dulles displayed skepticism about negotiating with the communists until the French achieved some sort of military victory or until the two opposing armies agreed to an armistice on the battlefield. He wanted, however, to present a united front against the Soviets at the meeting in hopes of French ratification of the EDC. Dulles cabled the President on February 6 that he had tried to restrict discussion on the Indochina issue at Geneva but he had failed in accomplishing that endeavor.¹⁶⁴

Four days later, the United States Ambassador in Saigon wired the State Department, informing the acting Secretary that General Navarre believed there existed only a limited possibility of any decisive French victory in the next three months. That same day, February 10, Eisenhower wired to Dulles that "[t]here is no ground for assuming we intend to reverse or ignore U.S. commitments to the French. . . . [This] administration has no intention of evading its pledge in the area." Cognizant of the President's wishes, Dulles

reluctantly acquiesced to the Soviet Foreign Minister's motion. The Berlin Conference ended on February 18 with an agreement that the five powers (this included a Communist Chinese representative) would meet in Geneva in two months and discuss the unresolved issues concerning the past conflict Korea and the on-going crisis in Southeast Asia.¹⁶⁵

At the NSC meeting on March 4, Director of the Foreign Operations Administration Harold Stassen who had recently returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, reported that he had found the situation at Dien Bien Phu better than he had imagined. The French actually hoped for a Vietminh offensive before the rainy season so that they could crush it. A report from the Operations Coordination Board on Indochina, however, stated otherwise. It suggested that the situation in Vietnam could deteriorate rapidly and the United States should consider direct military action into the region to ensure the maintenance of American vital national security interests there.¹⁶⁶

While the Americans discussed the matter and the French waited for an attack, the Vietminh moved their equipment into position to strike a decisive blow against the fort. The Vietnamese insurgents had high hopes regarding their chances of victory. Surrounding the approximate 13,000 French troops in the fortress, the Vietminh had 50,000 troops in the hills nearby and another almost 50,000 support troops scattered throughout the area. Ho Chi Minh described

the situation as he saw it to a foreign correspondent in the beginning of January. Taking off his sun helmet, he turned it upside down and felt around the bottom of it. "Dien Bien Phu," the rebel leader said, "is a valley and it is completely surrounded by mountains. The cream of the French expeditionary forces are down there and," feeling the brim of the helmet, "we are around the mountains. And they'll never get out."¹⁶⁷

General Giap viewed the situation through the eyes of a Chinese proverb. "Never fight on terrain that looked like a tortoise turned upside down. Never camp there for long." He had originally planned to attack on January 25. But the insurgents encountered more difficulty than they expected when they tried moving the artillery pieces by hand through the jungle passes. The entire Vietminh artillery had to be brought from China to the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu over roads, footpaths, and mountain passes. The Vietminh often had to take apart their equipment to move it, and then reassemble it on site. According to Vietminh sources, the process of moving the artillery into the surrounding hills took more than eight million work days to complete. General Tran Do, a Vietminh division commander who orchestrated part of the move, recalled:

The ten kilometer track was so narrow that if a slight deviation of the wheels had taken place, the gun would have fallen into a deep ravine. . . . Entire nights were spent laboring by torchlight to gain 500 or 1000 meters. . . . During the day, reconnaissance planes buzzed overhead making constant dives while the

fighters strafed and bombed. At night enemy artillery was very active and its shelling sometimes caused many casualties among the workers. . . . The heroic haulers had to lie flat on the ground for a few seconds, not losing their hold on the ropes, even if their hands were bleeding.¹⁶⁸

Additionally, Vietminh intelligence estimated that the size of the French fort had increased by fifteen times in the last month, because of the increased number of French troops and the amount of construction at the site. Giap would have to change his tactics since the training his forces had received did not prepare them to operate over such a large area. Recalling Ho Chi Minh's admonition of "if you are not certain of victory, do not launch the attack," Giap delayed his offensive against the French citadel for six weeks.¹⁶⁹

Giap did not envision the Vietminh attack on the fort as a short operation. Instead, he prepared for a prolonged assault on his enemy. The campaign would last until the rainy season, if necessary. Time, as was discussed before, was on the side of the attackers. Giap planned for several coordinated attacks on the fortress culminating in a massive offensive after he had wore down the enemy's ability to resist. Every attack involved a precise orchestration of artillery barrages coordinated with massive infantry assaults in order to overwhelm the enemy from the initial onslaught. And while the artillery and infantry swamped the French ground positions, concealed Vietminh anti-aircraft guns would hamper the efforts of the French Air Force.

Since the Dien Bien Phu fortress depended on the air-drops from French cargo aircraft, eliminating that resupply effort would help negate the threat on the ground.¹⁷⁰

When Vietminh preparations had been completed according to Giap's specifications, the former school teacher turned self-taught military general issued a proclamation to his forces. "Officers and troops, the battle of Dienbienphu is about to begin." Giap said that winning the upcoming battle meant "exterminating the major part of the best enemy forces." A victory would "help the world-wide movement for peace in Indochina, especially at a moment when . . . the French Government is at last trying to negotiate to end the conflict." Giap was obviously referring to the upcoming conference at Geneva the end of April.¹⁷¹

Giap's proclamation continued, saying "it will be an honor to have taken part in this historic battle." The general cited the amount of perseverance the Vietminh soldiers would need in order to be victorious. They had fought valiantly for eight years. They must not give up now, no matter how intense the fight might be. Giap concluded with the charge, "The hour of glory has come. Officers and troops of all the units of all services, forward to win President Ho's victory flag." The French would at long last get the opportunity for which they had anxiously waited. They would finally get the chance to meet the enemy in open conflict at the location of French

choosing.¹⁷²

While the Vietminh infantry was preparing for the ground offensive, rebel artillery was harassing the Dien Bien Phu defenses. On January 26, 1954, a single seventy-five millimeter howitzer fired the first artillery rounds at the fortress. The attack was brief and relatively ineffective. Inexperienced French Union troops felt that the single gun was indicative of the weakness of their foe. Seasoned soldiers, however, showed concern when the responding French artillery and fighters could not locate the supposed lone artillery piece. These veterans feared that this was a sign of bad things to come.

On February 3, this artillery shelling intensified into a thirty-minute barrage by a battery of weapons firing in honor of the Tet holiday. These artillery attacks became more fierce as the month wore on. General Giap wanted the most fire directed towards the airstrip and the French aircraft parked near it. Colonel Christian Marie Ferdinand de la Croix de Castries, commander of the French fort, sent a series patrols into the surrounding hills to find and destroy the Vietminh heavy guns. All of these expeditions met with disastrous ends. This was more ominous foreboding for the fate of the French fort.¹⁴⁶

The long-awaited Vietminh ground assault on Dien Bien Phu began on March 13. Giap concentrated his attack on the northern outposts of Beatrice, Gabrielle, and Anne-Marie.

In his initial reports, the American ambassador in Saigon Donald Heath wired that the French believed they could hold the fort. Three days later, he warned that "the situation at Dien Bien Phu gives cause for concern." The Vietminh artillery had rendered the airstrip unusable, the weather hampered the French air attacks, and the French supply of ammunition ran dangerously low. The following day, March 17, the U.S. consul at Hanoi wrote "the battle in progress is a crucial engagement of the war." At the NSC meeting on March 18, CIA Director Dulles gave the French a 50-50 chance of winning.¹⁷⁴

Because of the precarious situation in Indochina, French Defense Minister Rene Pleven dispatched General Paul Ely, the French equivalent of the United States Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the United States. Ely arrived in Washington on Saturday, March 20, bringing with him the latest information on the deteriorating situation at Dien Bien Phu as well as an urgent request for more U.S. support and assistance.

Ely's first meeting was that Saturday night at the home of Admiral Radford. Also attending the dinner meeting were General Ridgway, Vice President Nixon, and CIA Director Dulles. The news that the Frenchman related to the American was not very good. He, too, believed that the French fortress had a 50-50 chance of surviving the Vietminh assault. Over the next few days, Ely would learn how far

the United States was willing to go to help the French.¹⁷⁵

During his stay in the United States, General Ely met primarily with his American counterpart, Admiral Radford. For whatever reason, the Frenchman was under the impression that the American Chairman represented the opinions of the President. Radford neither confirmed or denied this feeling. Ely made it clear that the French government had sent him to inform the United States not to expect any immediate resolution of the crisis in Indochina. But the French desperately needed increased amounts of United States aid to continue their fight against the Vietminh. And Ely brought a long list of the French request for aircraft, small arms, ammunition and other supplies. Radford stated that it was important that the French continued their military effort against the Vietminh until they won the war and stopped the spread of communism into the region.¹⁷⁶

Ely and Radford met with Eisenhower two days later. Radford hoped that Ely's briefing on the current situation at Dien Bien Phu might convince the President to further consider the use of U.S. forces in the region. Following Ely's appeal, Eisenhower reiterated his anti-colonial idea that the French must move towards granting full independence to the Associated States. However, the President did not want to be in a position to deny any military aid desperately needed by the French in Vietnam. He directed Admiral Radford to fulfill the French matériel request as

best as possible. This petition included sending 25 B-26 medium bombers, 12 F-8 fighters, 14 C-47 transports, and 20 helicopters to Indochina.¹⁷⁷

The two chiefs met with Secretary Dulles on March 23. Upon Ely's request for possible United States intervention, Dulles responded that the United States would possibly intervene in Indochina only if the Chinese openly supported the Vietminh militarily. Additionally, the Secretary restated for the French general that the policy of the current administration was that the United States would not send any armed forces to the area without Congressional approval. Dulles also stated that if U.S. forces did get directly involved in Indochina, they would want to accomplish nothing short of victory. This response did not match General Ely's wishes, but the Secretary would not concede to anything more.¹⁷⁸

The controversial part of General Ely's trip to Washington occurred on March 25. Radford asked him if he would postpone his trip home for one day because of an important NSC meeting scheduled for that day. Ely obliged Radford's request. After the NSC meeting, the two military chiefs and an interpreter had one last discussion before Ely's return to France. Radford asked Ely if the French government had considered making a request for United States intervention in the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu. The conditions for this action were dependent upon "if the

Communists intervened or if, for other reasons, the French needed more air power than they could muster." Ely responded that, "since he had been instructed by the French Defense Minister to raise the question of American intervention, it was obvious that France contemplated making such a request."¹⁷⁹

The two players disagree over what they next discussed. Ely recalls that Radford then described for him a series of bombing raids codenamed "Operation Vautour (Vulture)." This plan involved the use of over sixty USAF B-29 heavy bombers launched from Clark Air Base in the Philippines accompanied by 150 US Navy fighter escorts operating off of the aircraft carriers Essex and Boxer in the Gulf of Tonkin. Their mission would include attacking the Vietminh installations surrounding Dien Bien Phu as well as their communications and antiaircraft defenses throughout Indochina. Ely also says that Radford even included the option of dropping three tactical atomic weapons on the Vietminh positions. This option fell in line with Eisenhower's "New Look" agenda, favoring the limited use of nuclear weapons to get, according to Defense Secretary Charles Wilson, a "bigger bang for the buck."¹⁸⁰

The Eisenhower policy constituted the same ideas about containment found in NSC-68 but in meeting the demands of containment, he hoped to employ more fiscal conservatism. The Chief Executive hoped that this approach would allow him

to reduce the military budget while increasing America's lead in nuclear weaponry. The President himself remarked that "our most valued [and yet] most costly asset is our young men; let's don't use them any more than we have to." He wanted to find some sort of balance between maintaining a strong military force and a strong economy. In other words, Eisenhower hoped that a New Look for the military would also be part of a New Look for domestic and fiscal policy. Financial moderation accompanied with an increased reliance on nuclear weapons served that purpose of accomplishing both military objectives and domestic goals.¹⁸¹

By emphasizing the use of tactical nuclear weapons as the front-line for America's defense, Eisenhower's "New Look" policy expanded the role of the strategic air force and reduced the importance given to land and sea forces. Eisenhower did not believe that future battles would resemble those in World War II or Korea where two huge armies clashed in prolonged conflicts. Instead, he envisioned long-range bombers, carrying small nuclear weapons that could be used tactically on the battlefield, as the new instruments of American policy. He wanted to rely on America's lead in technology instead of the size of its armed forces to achieve the United States military and political objective of containing the spread of communism.¹⁸²

General Matthew Ridgway, Chief-of-Staff for the Army,

obviously did not like the way his service's portion of the defense budget decreased in comparison to that of the Air Force. He wanted to maintain a large standing army with specialized divisions and a wide variety of weapons. He found it difficult to endorse a policy where the Air Force and Navy played the only major roles and where they received "the cream of the crop of the nation's young men." Ridgway also believed that the "New Look" strategy forced America into "all or nothing postures." He remarked, "if the United States, by its own act, were deliberately to risk provoking [a general war], it must first materially increase its readiness to accept the consequences." Despite his objectives, the numerical strength of the Army decreased from 1.5 million men in the winter of 1953 to under one million by 1957.¹⁸³

Whereas Ely's recollections fit in well in the present administration's ideas about military policy, Admiral Radford remembered the discussion with the French General in a different way. He says that the two men signed an agreement stating "it was advisable that military planning authorities push their planning work as far as possible so that there would be no time wasted when and if our governments decided to oppose enemy [Chinese] air intervention over Indochina." He even told Ely that the United States could have 350 carrier aircraft in the area in two days, if the need arose. At no time did he offer the

unilateral use of U.S. airpower at Dien Bien Phu, and he never mentioned the use of nuclear weapons. He believes that a miscommunication occurred in the translation between the two chiefs. Whatever the case, Radford's covert conference with Ely clearly demonstrates his intention to inject some U.S. military power in Indochina. He set out to convince Eisenhower and Dulles that his plan would settle the crisis in Southeast Asia.¹⁸⁴

After his meetings in Washington, General Ely returned to France and reported to the Prime Minister that the two military chiefs had reached "complete accord on all matters." French leaders met on March 29 to discuss the implications of Operation Vulture. They thought that the Chinese might view such an operation as an act of direct intervention by the intervention in Indochina. This might provoke the communists to intervene on behalf of the Vietminh. But the French ministers decided that they would take that risk. They all believed that this "limited operation" would not lead to an extension of the war. When the panel informed General Navarre about the Radford proposal, he, too endorsed the action. Navarre believed that some sort of airstrikes made by American bombers would destroy the enemy's artillery and antiaircraft batteries. This would thus stabilize the situation around the fort. While the French leaders rallied behind the possibility of United States intervention, Radford's proposal met with

stiff opposition from other members on the National Security Council and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹⁸⁵

While General Ely and Admiral Radford were discussing possible U.S. intervention at Dien Bien Phu, the President met with his cabinet in the White House. Secretary Dulles reviewed the meetings with the French General and discussed the political implications of any United States action in the area. He said, despite the colonialism issue, the French must win in Indochina. If the "Reds" conquered that part of the world, their victory would cut the U.S. defense line in half. The Secretary predicted that the United States might have to act in the region relatively soon. But he considered the risks of action now would be far less than if the United States intervened "in several years."¹⁸⁶

United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge asked if the situation in Vietnam could be turned into "another Greece." He referred to the communist insurrection in that southern European country after World War II. The United States had "assisted" the Greek government in quelling the disturbance. This helped give impetus to Truman's 1947 address to Congress about helping the world's free people frustrate communist insurgencies. The Truman Doctrine stated that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities. . . ."¹⁸⁷

The President responded to Lodge's question that there

was no comparison between the two wars. The Greeks were "sturdy" people who truly wanted to defeat the communist insurgents. Because of their fortitude, they accomplished that without any of U.S. military intervention. The Vietnamese were "backward" and were having a difficult time stopping the rebels. Also, most of the Vietnamese did not believe in the sincerity of the French to grant independence to the Associated States after they subdued the revolutionaries. Because of the gravity that Eisenhower and Dulles had placed on this crisis, the Cabinet members believed this problem would not be solved easily. When, if, and how the United States might become involved in the matter still remained unresolved.¹⁸⁸

On March 29, Admiral Radford delivered a report to the NSC describing his meeting with his French counterpart. General Ely confirmed the CIA's estimate that the French had a 50-50 chance of winning at Dien Bien Phu. Ely described the paradox that the French faced concerning the outcome of the battle. If the French lost the battle, it could still be considered a military victory because the Vietminh would have suffered a higher casualty rate than the French. But if the French won the conflict, it might still be considered a loss psychologically. Growing internal dissent to the war would probably lead to a public outcry demanding to know long the fighting in Indochina was going to continue.

Radford reported that the French government understood

the importance of Southeast Asia to international affairs. But France needed continued financial assistance from the United States to continue their fight. Radford wrote that he feared the measures taken by the French would not stop the deterioration of the situation at Dien Bien Phu. The Admiral concluded his report by saying

If Dien Bien Phu is lost . . . only prompt and forceful intervention by the United States could avert the loss of all of Southeast Asia to communist domination. I am convinced that the United States must be prepared to take such action.¹⁸⁹

Although he never mentioned any discussion concerning Operation Vulture in his report, one might infer that the use of the words "such action" meant the possible execution of such a strategy.

Admiral Radford's knowledge of air operations came from his experience in naval aircraft prior to becoming Chairman of the JCS on August 15, 1953. During World War II, he had commanded two aircraft carrier groups in the Pacific and directed naval air attacks against Tokyo, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima. In 1949 while serving as Vice Chief of Naval Operations, he had supported the Navy request to build a "super carrier." This ship would have a larger flight deck and be capable of carrying larger aircraft which could drop atomic weapons. Congress later voted to cancel such an acquisition. After his brief stay at the Pentagon, Radford became the commander-in-chief of all U.S. military forces in the Pacific. During his tenure, American naval assets

provided air and naval support to U.N. forces during the Korean conflict. Radford's first-hand knowledge of the area and the assets the French requested probably influenced his thinking about the feasibility of Operation Vulture.¹⁹⁰

Radford called a special meeting of the JCS on the same day he submitted his report. He wanted to discuss with the generals the possibility of launching the massive airstrike mission into Vietnam. All of the Chiefs voted against Radford's proposal. Air Force General Nathan Twining did not oppose the use of atomic weapons in the region. In fact, he knew the Air Force stood to gain the most prestige from such an operation. Years later, Twining recalled,

You could take all day to drop a bomb [and] make sure you put it in the right place. No opposition. And clean those Commies out of there and the band could play the *Marseillaise* and the French would come marching out of Dien Bien Phu in fine shape. And those Commies would say, "Well, those guys may do this again to us. We'd better be careful."¹⁹¹

Twining, however, objected to the United States making a hasty, unilateral commitment to the French. He also felt that the French should grant "true sovereignty" to Vietnam.

The two chiefs from the Department of the Navy also opposed Admiral Radford's plan. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Robert Carney agreed with Twining's objections about the timing of the operation. He did not believe that airstrikes alone could improve the French position at Dien Bien Phu. The Commandant of the Marine Corps General Lemuel Shepherd regarded the use of airpower against insurgents as

ineffective. In his dissent, he commented

I feel that we can expect no significant military results from an improvised air offensive against the guerrilla forces. They simply do not offer us a target which our air forces will find remunerative.¹⁹²

Army Chief of Staff General Ridgway emphatically opposed Admiral Radford's proposal. He remarked, "The United States capability for effective intervention in the Dien Bien Phu operation was altogether disproportionate to the liability it would incur." Ridgway's objection to the plan also stemmed partially from his dislike of Eisenhower's "New Look" strategy for military operations. Ridgway was deeply concerned that after the United States launched Operation Vulture, there would be the "risk of a general war" breaking out in Southeast Asia, a war such like he had just finished fighting in Korea one year earlier.¹⁹³

Ridgway based his opposition to Operation Vulture on those personal experiences during the Korean conflict. In his memoirs, he recalled, "In Korea, we learned that air and naval power alone cannot win a war and that inadequate ground forces cannot win one either." The United States would have to send a large enough ground force to Indochina to be able to fight a war of attrition. Not only would any such conflict guarantee heavy military casualties from the fighting, the soldiers would also suffer from the oppressive heat and jungle diseases. The Army general believed that the sole objective of any army must be "Success in Battle." Only if the American public was willing to accept a high

number of casualties would the army be able to achieve "success in battle" in Vietnam. For these reasons, Ridgway would not support Radford's plan.¹⁹⁴

In order to prove his point that the Army would be needed in Southeast Asia to follow the initial airstrikes by the Navy and Air Force, General Ridgway sent a team of experts from several Army specialties to Southeast Asia to determine the probability of success of any Army operation in the region. Included in this detachment were engineers, communications specialists, medical officers, and combat-experienced infantry officers. They overlooked the terrain, ascertained the depth of the water around Saigon, and evaluated the harbor facilities. They surveyed the network of roads and railroads and estimated the feasibility of transporting supplies from the north to the south of Vietnam. They gathered information on the climate, the amount of rainfall in the rainforests, and the types of diseases in the jungles. Ridgway writes, "[t]hey went out to get the answers to a thousand questions that those who had so blithely recommended that we go to war there had never taken the trouble to ask."¹⁹⁵

The findings from their expedition matched Ridgway's fears. The area was practically devoid of storage facilities. It had no working highway or railroad network. Its port and airfield facilities were totally inadequate to meet the demands of an American expeditionary force. The

land was covered in jungles and the temperature proved to be repressive. In short, according to his detail, the only way to win in this region would be to "go in with a military force adequate in all its branches" to accept nothing short of a "decisive military victory." But the price to achieve that victory would require "a tremendous cost in men and money."¹⁹⁶

General Ridgway submitted a position paper on his ideas and the findings from his research team to the NSC during the first week of April. In it, he reiterated his position that "a victory in Indochina cannot be assured by United States intervention with air and naval forces alone." He also restated his position that the possible use of nuclear weapons in the region "would not reduce the number of ground forces required to achieve a military victory in Indochina." The United States would have to send seven divisions to the region if the French withdrew and the Chinese did not intervene, and twelve divisions if the French withdrew and the Chinese did intervene on behalf of the Vietminh. And any American intervention in Southeast Asia would affect the U.S. commitment to NATO "for a considerable period."¹⁹⁷

Defense Secretary Wilson instructed Admiral Radford to hold one more meeting with the other military chiefs. Wilson wanted to ascertain their recommendations on how the United States might respond to a French request for American air and naval help at Dien Bien Phu. The JCS met with the

Chairman on April 2, 1954. This meeting of the JCS followed a meeting earlier that day of Wilson and Radford with Eisenhower and Dulles. That conference will be discussed later. The response from the JCS had not changed much since the last time they had discussed the matter. Generals Ridgway and Shepherd again voiced their unqualified objection to the proposal. And Admiral Carney felt irresolute towards the matter. Only Air Force General Twining gave any sort of support to Radford's suggestion. This almost unanimous lack of support from the military service chiefs, displayed twice in one week, foreshadowed the ominous fate of Operation Vulture and any other U.S. military effort to help the French at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁹⁸

Chapter 7:

Dulles Lobbies for United Action

As Admiral Radford developed a military plan to solve the Indochina crisis, other members of the Eisenhower administration began exploring the options of a diplomatic solution to the situation. For years, historians have believed that it was Secretary Dulles who had made all the foreign policy decisions during the 1950s and Eisenhower had acted like a rubber stamp. However, recent historiography shows that the President played an active role in formulating foreign policy and Dulles acted as his mouthpiece. To quote Melanie Billings-Yun, Eisenhower acted "with the forced calm of a general who stands back while [his] subordinates carry out his strategy." And Eisenhower himself in 1954 told Swede Hazlett that Dulles "never made a serious pronouncement . . . without complete and exhaustive consultation with me in advance and, of course, my approval." Therefore, although Dulles did most of the leg-work to attempt to gain support for the diplomatic solution to the Indochina crisis, it was Eisenhower who was in control and Dulles was the one who gave advice.¹⁹⁹

On the morning of March 24, while General Ely was still in Washington, Secretary Dulles and Admiral Radford held an important telephone conversation which clearly defined the

position of the two advisors. Both agreed that practically nothing constructive had been accomplished with the French general. Both also agreed that the French were in dire straits militarily at Dien Bien Phu. And, both were in unison that the United States could not stand idly by and watch another part of Asia fall into the control of the communists.

The two disagreed over how and when to act in the area. Radford, as mentioned previously, wanted immediate action. He believed that if the French fort fell to the Vietminh, the French might simply walk out of Indochina. Dulles, on the other hand, did not want to move so quickly. He, instead, wanted to consider the question of how to defeat the communists in Indochina separately from the French crisis at Dien Bien Phu. Dulles restated his opposition to U.S. airstrikes at Dien Bien Phu. But he reassured Radford that he did not advocate a policy of inactivity.²⁰⁰

Over the next month, Dulles would work diligently to find a diplomatic solution to ensure that Indochina as a whole was not lost to the communists. As it turned out, his first step was to make a speech outlining the administration's policy regarding the conflict. He received background information from members of his staff and conferred with the leaders of both political parties. And, of course, he thoroughly briefed the President on the content of his oration. On the same day as Radford's JCS

meeting (March 29) Secretary Dulles addressed the Overseas Press club:

The imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Soviet Russia and its Chinese Communist ally would be a grave threat to the whole free community. . . . Sometimes it is necessary to take risks to win peace just as it is necessary in war to take risks to win victory.²⁰¹

The administration's strategy to win the peace centered on a plan that the Secretary called "United Action." United Action reflected the perceived lessons learned from cooperative action during the Korean crisis. The plan called for the creation of a coalition between the United States, France, England, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Associated States of Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). These countries would form a collective defense pact to stop further communist advancement into Southeast Asia.²⁰²

The Secretary's aid, Robert Bowie, recollected that Dulles wanted the speech to sound "menacing without committing anybody to anything." Dulles actually hoped that United Action would bolster the French will to fight the Vietminh as well as, once again, persuade the French to grant independence to the Associated States. But it also ensured that if France pulled its troops out of Vietnam, the United States would not fight in the region alone. The key to ensuring that the United States did not get unilaterally dragged into the French conflict rested with Great Britain. Dulles would spend most of April trying to get support for

this plan from the English.²⁰³

The Vietminh began the second phase of their attack the following day, March 30. General Giap now concentrated on the eastern stations of Dominique and Elaine. He later turned to the western French strongpoint of Huguette. Giap's objectives were to encircle the remaining French forces, seize and hold the airfield, and effectively cut the French means of resupply. Giap wanted to fight day and night, desiring to slowly wear down his enemy. Following the receipt of diplomatic cables from Hanoi and Saigon that related these latest Vietminh advances, Secretary of State Dulles realized the Free World had a limited time to act decisively to save Dien Bien Phu.²⁰⁴

It is obvious that President Eisenhower's motivation for building and strengthening alliances had probably come from his days in World War II and later when he was commander of NATO forces. John Foster Dulles based his ideas of a strong united stance against the communists on his own thoughts about how appeasement failed to abate Hitler's desire for hegemony in Europe. Had Chamberlain taken a firmer stance at Munich in 1938, the Nazis might have reconsidered their plans to invade much of the continent and drag the world into a global confrontation. Dulles also believed that the failure of the Truman administration to clearly define its goals in the Western Pacific region baited the communists in North Korea to

invade the South. With clearly defined objectives and constant vigilance, the free world could force the communists into eventual submission.²⁰⁵

There is an interesting paradox between why Dulles, though committed to a firm stance against the global communist menace, opposed the extensive use of U.S. military force in Indochina. In 1952, the Secretary wrote that once the Western World neutralized the threat from Soviet Russia or Communist China

by a known will to retaliate . . . the internal revolutionary problem will become more manageable. . . . Therefore, the U.S. might consider whether open military aggression by Red Armies [into Indochina] could not best be prevented by the readiness to take retaliatory action, rather than by attempts to meet the aggression on the spot where it occurs.²⁰⁶

Secretary Dulles expressed his foreign policy goals of a continued firm stance against communist aggression and liberation of Soviet-controlled territory during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting on January 15, 1953. But he believed that the United States could accomplish both objectives through methods other than military conflict.

People who are enslaved [by the Soviets] are people who deserve to be free. . . and ought to be free because if they are the servile instruments of aggressive despotism, they will eventually be welded into a force which will be highly dangerous to ourselves and to all the free world. Therefore, we must always have in mind the liberation of these captive peoples. . . . [This] liberation can be accomplished by processes short of war.²⁰⁷

In a *Foreign Affairs* article two months later, Dulles reiterated his ideas that the threat of war, along with

negotiations, could force the communists to shrink and produce better results than the actual use of military force:

A would-be aggressor will hesitate to commit aggression if he knows in advance that he thereby not only exposes those particular forces which he chooses to use for his aggression, but also deprives his other assets of "sanctuary" status. That does not mean turning every local war into a world war. . . . It does mean that the free world must maintain the collective means and be willing to use them in a way which most effectively makes aggression too risky and expensive to be tempting.²⁰⁸

Dulles concluded that various sections of the world demanded different foreign policy approaches. He believed that the method which would produce favorable results in Indochina involved intense negotiations and unified actions among the United States allies to maintain a strong diplomatic and military posture in the area.²⁰⁹

The Eisenhower administration's ideas regarding United Action did not pertain only to the French crisis in Indochina. The President hoped to develop alliances with different nations, hoping to relieve some of the responsibility of America getting involved in every incident anywhere around the globe. This was in line with Eisenhower's desire to curb defense spending by limiting the amount of overseas deployments he assigned to U.S. troops. Secretary Dulles publicly addressed these ideas on January 12, 1954, during the same speech he introduced to the world the term "massive retaliation." Dulles praised the actions of the Truman administration in Greece, Turkey, "West"

Berlin, and Korea to thwart the spread of communism. He reaffirmed his belief that local defense against the evil Soviet menace would always be important. But it was not enough to contain "the mighty landpower of the communist world. Local defense must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power."²¹⁰

Along with this military force, the United States had to develop more allies and build a "collective security" throughout the world. Dulles cited how coalition efforts in Korea and Europe had already deterred further Soviet advancement. More had to be accomplished however, including, as mentioned previously, moving forward with the European Defense Community. By following these two principles, the free world would be able to respond to global crises "at places and with means of its own choosing." The Secretary concluded by saying that the Eisenhower administration did not claim "to have some magic formula that insures against all forms of Communist success." At times, it was possible that there would be some setbacks. But, those setbacks would only have "temporary significance." While Admiral Radford planned the "massive retaliation" option in Indochina, Secretary Dulles worked on the "collective security" route.²¹¹

The idea of United Action was not an entirely new option for the crisis in Southeast Asia. French Prime Minister Rene Plevin held a series of meetings with Truman

administration officials during the last week in January, 1951. One of the topics discussed was the on-going problem in Indochina. The Prime Minister related how France was suffering serious costs, both in money and lives, in their war with the Vietminh. But the French forces would continue their efforts in "resisting the communist onslaught in order to maintain the security and independence" of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.²¹²

Truman had promised that United States aid to the French would continue. Additionally, his administration would expedite sending increased amounts of military material to Indochina. Following their conference, the two leaders had issued a joint statement regarding their deliberations. The President and the Prime Minister stated that they "reaffirmed their belief that the principle of collective security . . . is the bulwark of world peace." Already France and the United States had considered some sort of defense pact for Southeast Asia. Therefore, United Action was not such a revolutionary idea for that region.²¹³

Two important events regarding the viability of United Action occurred on April 2, 1954. In the morning, Dulles, Radford, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, and NSC Chief Robert Cutler, met with the President to outline the points that Radford and Dulles would raise at a meeting with eight prominent members of Congress the next day. The issue that would be discussed was what were the U.S. options in

Indochina if the French withdrew or acquiesced to a diplomatic solution at the upcoming Geneva convention. Instead of hoping to gain Congressional support for immediate intervention at Dien Bien Phu, the administration hoped to secure a "blank check resolution" that would authorize Eisenhower the "discretionary authority" to use U.S. military force (but not to send U.S. ground troops) to stop the further spread of communism into Southeast Asia.²¹⁴

In no way, however, would this resolution "derogate from the authority of Congress to declare war." It merely authorized the President to act if the circumstances required an immediate U.S. response and there was no time for extensive deliberations with Congress. Eisenhower further believed that Congressional support of the resolution would further increase the chances of allied support for United Action. But if Congress rejected the proposal, he felt that United Action would be dead in the water and the Communists would have the advantage in Indochina and later at Geneva. Eisenhower instructed his advisors, however, not to immediately force the resolution on the legislators. Instead, they should find out how the Congressmen would resolve the current crisis.²¹⁵

In the afternoon of April 2, Dulles met with British ambassador Sir Roger Makins. This was the first but possibly the most important step towards getting allied support for United Action. Dulles received some support for

the plan, but the British leaned more toward compromising with the Vietminh on a partition plan of Vietnam to solve the crisis. Dulles believed that partition would lead to the direct takeover of all of Indochina by the Vietminh. Only a united response would convince the communists that "stepped-up activities on their part . . . could lead to disastrous retaliation on our [allied] part." Nevertheless, Dulles tried to handle the ambassador delicately. British support for the plan was vastly important. If he could manage only limited success with Ambassador Makins, maybe Eisenhower would have better luck by directly asking Churchill to consider the strategy. But first, the administration would try to get unqualified support from members of Congress.²¹⁶

As scheduled, Dulles, Radford and the eight congressmen met at the State Department on April 3. Radford explained the deteriorating military situation at Dien Bien Phu. The French were in a desperate position. American analysts believed that they could lose the fight at any time. Dulles then gave a summary of the political repercussions such Dien Bien Phu was lost. He believed that if nothing was done, however, to save Indochina from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence, all of Southeast Asia would eventually be lost. Dulles concluded by saying he had a difficult time convincing foreign leaders to join a coalition since he could not assure them that the United States government

supported such action.²¹⁷

The legislators asked the Admiral if immediate congressional approval of U.S. military actions would save Dien Bien Phu. Radford said that, for all practical purposes, the Vietminh would win that battle with or without United States intervention. Senate Majority Leader William Knowland (R-CA) stated that "we [Congress] want no more Koreas with the United States furnishing 90 percent of the manpower." Minority Leader Lyndon Johnson (D-TX) shared the Republican leader's opinion, and stated he would "pound the President's desk in the Oval Office to emphasize his opposition." (Johnson would see things in a different light when he occupied the Oval Office.) The representatives then agreed to authorize the use of U.S. force in the region on three conditions:

- 1) that Dulles secure "definite commitments" from the allies to join the coalition, especially the United Kingdom,
- 2) that the French forces continue the fight, and
- 3) that the French promise to accelerate the independence of the Indochina states.

Any Congressional support that might have existed for U.S. unilateral military action under Operation Vulture was gone forever.²¹⁸

Having received a lukewarm reception from the congressional leaders, Secretary Dulles continued to press for support for United Action from the other nations that

would be affected by the pact. Following his conference at the State Department, Dulles consulted with the French ambassador. Dulles ensured him that the United States did not want to see Indochina fall under communist control, but it would not act alone since other allies also had a stake in Indochina. The meeting with the French ambassador accomplished little except to reiterate the differences of opinion about the region. The official French stance was that the "time for formulating coalitions had passed" and direct American support was needed or else Dien Bien Phu could fall at any moment.²¹⁹

On April 4, Dulles conferred with the New Zealand and Australian ambassadors. Australian ambassador Sir Percy Spender believed the best course of action would be to encourage the French to continue the fight. Because of their geographical proximity to Southeast Asia, neither country wanted to appear to the United States as lukewarm on any proposal that would stop communist aggression in the South Pacific region. The Australians, and the New Zealanders, according to Sir Leslie Munro, therefore, welcomed the possibility of joining the military alliance, but admitted that they would have to discuss the matter with their respective governments. Dulles had now personally met with all the principal players in an attempt to secure backing for his United Action agreement.²²⁰

Returning on April 4 from a restful weekend at Camp

David, Eisenhower, anxious to resolve the situation with the least amount of involvement by U.S. troops, met with his two advisors as well as Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, State Department Special Counsel Douglas MacArthur II and Deputy Defense Secretary Roger Kyes. After being briefed on the meeting with the congressmen the day before, Eisenhower discussed his three stipulations for U.S. intervention. The first two were similar to those of the congressmen. First, the United States would act only in concert with its allies. Second, France must ensure the independence of the Associated States. As his final condition, Eisenhower insisted that any U.S. action have the advance approval of Congress. Some historians believed that the President knew he would receive opposition from the legislators. Therefore he made the last stipulation to ensure himself that should the Vietminh defeat the French, the Congress must receive the blame for "losing Indochina." Nonetheless, the meeting and Eisenhower's final stipulation killed any possibility of Operation Vulture.²²¹

Hopeful that his wartime ally might once again support his plan, Eisenhower then penned a letter to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill asking for his personal consideration of the United Action proposal:

I believe that the best way to put teeth in this concept [of deterring Communist aggression into Southeast Asia] . . . is through the establishment of a coalition composed of nations which have a vital concern in the checking of Communist expansion in the area. . . . The important thing is that the coalition

must be strong and it must be willing to fight if necessary. I do not envisage the need of any appreciable ground forces on your or our part.²²²

Churchill responded that he would talk the matter over with Dulles when he arrived in London later in the month.

At his press conference on April 7, Eisenhower reiterated the importance of Southeast Asia to the "Free World," and why it must not fall into communist control.

You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences. . . . [With] the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia following, now you begin to talk about areas that not only multiply the disadvantages that you would suffer through the loss of materials . . . but now you are talking really about millions and millions of people [falling to communist dictatorship]. . . . So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.²²³

When asked whether his administration had received any response for United Action from the allies, Eisenhower responded that not enough time had elapsed for the United States to receive definite answers. His letter to Churchill, and his comments during the press conference, indicate that the President favored some sort of intervention. But he insisted that the United States not act alone in the region. Additionally, he would not use atomic bombs against Asians for the second time in less than a decade. Eisenhower's threat of using atomic weapons against China may have been successful during the Korean War, but the chances of that happening again were

minimal.²²⁴

Historian Richard Immerman provides some perspective on why the President, though probably favoring military action, did not want to intervene alone and at Dien Bien Phu. Immerman writes that Eisenhower understood that defending Indochina required more than just sending airstrikes to attack Vietminh positions around the French fort, as proposed in Operation Vulture. Such military intervention, especially committed without the support of the American people, the Congress, U.S. allies, or even the Indochinese people, may be a "temporary expedient" for the problem. But backlash from one of the affected groups might make the long-term consequences of such an operation completely disastrous. However, according to Immerman, Eisenhower would not shy away from the crisis. Hence he made the comments that he did at the news conference on April 7.²²⁵

Eisenhower's "domino theory" press conference would not be the only time when he would have to explain to reporters about the importance of that region to U.S. interests. Two weeks earlier, in a prepared statement, the President had told journalists that he did not think it was necessary to reiterate the stake America had in the events in Southeast Asia. "The fighting going on . . . has become one of the battlegrounds of people that want to live their lives against this encroachment of communist aggression." This was a reiteration of United States containment goals.²²⁶

Three months after the domino example, another columnist asked Eisenhower about the significance of the region. This time, the President responded, "We want them [the Vietnamese] to have the same rights of self-government, the same opportunity to enjoy freedom, as we do ourselves." Here he focused on anti-colonialism objectives. Eisenhower understood the two competing principles found in the Indochina crisis. And he knew that somehow, the final solution must incorporate both of them.²²⁷

The French made two attempts in April to keep the prospects of Operation Vulture alive. On April 5, American ambassador to France C. Douglas Dillon wired a French request for United States airstrikes. French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault said that "immediate armed intervention of US carrier aircraft at Dien Bien Phu is now necessary to save the situation." Secretary Dulles relayed Eisenhower's response that "it is not possible for [the] US to commit belligerent acts in Indochina without full political understanding with France and other countries." Additionally, the President would not act on such an issue without receiving Congressional authority for such an operation.²²⁸

On April 23, the French again requested United States airstrikes near the French fort. This time the French general proposed incorporating United States Air Force B-29s into the Foreign Legion. Navarre believed that these heavy

bombers flying at high altitudes at night would encounter little resistance from Vietminh antiaircraft artillery. And if American pilots were needed to fly these aircraft, they could do so without papers or insignia, to avoid any international incidents if one of these planes was shot down and the crew became prisoners of the Vietminh.²²⁹

When the option of using B-29s was first presented to him by General Ely in early April, General Navarre, excited about the prospect of increased aerial bombardment, had not been convinced about the viability of the B-29 in the Indochinese theater. Navarre had three reasons why he believed the B-29 was not the best weapon for the present conflict. First, the French were already suffering from a lack of pilots to fly the available multi-engine aircraft to daily resupply Dien Bien Phu. To send even more to be trained on flying the Superfortress would deplete that number even more. Second, even if he could release some crews to train on the American bomber, it would be at least four months before they were familiar enough with the jet to fly it into combat. By that time, the fate of the French fort would already have been sealed. Finally, the appearance of a French heavy-bomber force might be provocation to bring the Chinese air force into the conflict. The B-29 had not fared too well against Chinese MiGs in the Korean conflict, and Navarre feared the same fate in Indochina. However, the worsening of the situation

at Dien Bien Phu and the offer to possibly have the Americans fly their own jets probably influenced the French General to change his mind about the margin of success of the heavy bombers in the skies over Vietnam.²³⁰

Secretary Dulles happened to be in Europe for a series of NATO meetings prior to the Geneva conference. He told Eisenhower, "it seems to me that Dien Bien Phu has become a symbol out of all proportion to its military importance." Dulles said that the French only saw two options to solve the Indochina problem: "Operation Vulture or a request for a cease-fire." After consulting with the President, the United States Secretary of State told the French, "armed intervention by executive action [without Congressional approval] is not warranted."²³¹

An interesting wrinkle occurred after the second plea for the execution of Operation Vulture. Following Foreign Minister Bidault's request for U.S. intervention, the Frenchman claimed that Dulles supposedly said, "And what if we gave you two atomic bombs?" Bidault contented that Dulles offered to use the nuclear weapons first on Communist Chinese territory, to interdict the Vietminh supply lines, and then near the French citadel. Bidault declined both offers, fearing an escalation of the conflict with the Chinese or even the Russians. He also responded that nuclear weapons could not save the fort because they would destroy both Vietminh and French positions.

The Foreign Minister, however, did pass on the American's offer to Premier Laniel. Dulles later met with the French leader. Although Secretary Dulles denied this conversation, whether the two discussed the issue of atomic weapons near China or at Dien Bien Phu remains a mystery. One thing that is recorded is that, following Bidault's request, Secretary Dulles said that U.S. intervention was "out of the question under existing circumstance." And the only way to alter those circumstances was to get British support for United Action.²³²

Air Force General Nathan Twining agreed with the President's decision to refrain from sending the French B-29s for three reasons. First, the French air force did not have any spare crews that U.S. advisors could train to fly the heavy bomber. Second, Twining believed that there were no targets suitable for the strategic bombing mission of the massive aircraft. And lastly, the French did not possess enough fighter escort aircraft to protect the Super-fortresses if the Chinese decided to launch MiG fighters against the bombers. Any possibility of Operation Vulture or any sort of United States military intervention had, by the end of April, lost all support from the President and the military service chiefs.²²³

As Operation Vulture slowly lost any possibility of coming to fruition, Secretary Dulles traveled to London and then Paris to gain concessions for United Action. The

British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden did not agree with the United States assumption that threatening the use of force would convince China to stay out of Vietnam. He insisted that a distinction existed between "warning against some new action and halting Chinese activity already in progress." The British, like the United States, displayed great concern about the possibility of sending ground troops to assist the French. Eden felt that as many nations as possible should be involved in the conflict in Southeast Asia. And he insisted that:

it does not seem that the Americans have formed any clear conception of the military operations which they propose should be conducted against China if threats fail to produce the desired result.²²⁴

Secretary Dulles arrived in London on April 11. At a dinner meeting that evening, he tried to explain the United States position to the British. He also mentioned that if Indochina fell to the communists, this might affect British interests in Malaya. He then explained that the United States no longer favored just a stern diplomatic warning to the Chinese about intervention in Indochina. The United States now considered forming a defense alliance for the region. This would hopefully allay any British concerns about any unilateral action in the area.

Eden proved to be more receptive to the long-range goals of the defense pact. He did not believe, however, that the Indochina situation could be solved through military means alone. The British conceded to become

involved in preliminary discussion about a military alliance for the region. Over the next two days, the two ministers discussed the provisions of the pact. Disagreement occurred over which countries should be invited to join such a pact. But they did agree to issue a statement stating "We are ready to take part, with the other countries principally concerned, in an examination of the possibility of establishing a collective defense . . . to assure the peace, security and freedom of Southeast Asia."²²⁵

Dulles had taken the first step to making United Action a reality. It was an important step as well, since Eisenhower believed any possibility of United Action becoming a viable option rested upon the United States receiving support from the British. Dulles immediately sent a cable to the President relaying his progress. In the conclusion of his letter, Dulles wrote, "Press generally friendly; and Daily Worker [an English newspaper] paid compliment of saying am most unwelcome guest since 1066." The next step in getting allied support would be almost as crucial since the United States needed France to continue their fight against the Vietminh.²²⁶

Secretary Dulles then flew to Paris to meet with Foreign Minister Bidault. During a meeting at the Quai d'Orsay on April 14, Dulles insisted that the United States did not want continued war in Indochina, but a means to a peaceful solution to the problem. He attempted to convince

the French that the creation of a coalition might slow the communist advancement into the region. Again, he emphasized the fact that the threat of some sort of allied response in the region might convince the enemy that they would pay too great a price if they tried to extend their "empire" into Southeast Asia. And Dulles said, "[the] United States concludes that no peace is possible in Indochina unless the Communists give up their intention of conquering all of Southeast Asia."²²⁷

Foreign Minister Bidault believed that the French had a small chance of achieving a favorable resolution at the upcoming Geneva conference because the war had lasted so long. He showed Secretary Dulles a letter describing the desperate state of affairs at Dien Bien Phu. Bidault then asked Dulles if Eisenhower would reconsider the possibility of unilateral American intervention at Dien Bien Phu. Dulles responded that any action must be part of a coalition effort.²²⁸

Dulles made some more progress of turning United Action into reality. During their talks, the French Foreign Minister voiced no opposition to the plan. He believed its only defect was that Dulles had proposed it too late to make much of a difference prior to the Geneva conference. On April 14, 1954, the two diplomats issued a statement declaring that "in close association with other interested nations, we will examine the possibility of establishing . .

. a collective defense to assure the peace, security and freedom of this area."²³⁹

Eisenhower shared the conviction of his Secretary of State regarding progress towards a coalition plan for the region. Two days after the issue of the joint French-United States statement regarding Indochina, the President sent a telegraph to Rene Coty, the French President, saluting the "gallantry and stamina of the commander and soldiers who are defending Dien Bien Phu." He said that these troops "are demonstrating . . . qualities on which the survival of the free world depends." Possibly by encouraging the French effort, the President could satisfy his stipulation of ensuring they continued the fight against the Vietminh. Still very cognizant of the colonial issues involved in the region, Eisenhower focused instead on the containment concerns of the French effort against the communist aggressors.²⁴⁰

The Eisenhower Administration decided to test the waters of public support for possible United States intervention in Indochina one last time before the Geneva accords. Vice President Nixon addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors' annual convention on April 16. Following his speech, he agreed to answer some questions under the assumption that the correspondents considered his remarks as "off-the-record." One reporter asked him if the only way to save the area from the communists if the French

withdrew involved sending United States troops to Indochina. Nixon responded that he did not think such a situation would occur. But if it did, he felt "that the executive branch of the government has to take the politically unpopular position [of sending U.S. forces to the region.]"²⁴¹

By the next morning, Nixon's off-the-record comments made the headlines in most major newspapers across the country. The news of his comments almost spread around the world, causing a fervor both inside and outside of the United States. Secretary Dulles was not entirely upset at the Vice President's comments. Talking to Eisenhower's press secretary James Hagerty, Dulles said he liked the idea that the Vice President's comments kept the communists guessing. However, under Eisenhower's order, Jameson Parker, spokesman for the State Department, responded to reporters' questions about Nixon's comments saying, "The speech enunciated no new United States policy. . . . It expressed full agreement and support for the policy . . . of the President."²⁴²

Eisenhower correctly interpreted the outcry of public opinion against any such action. Privately, he supported the comments made by the vice-president. Eisenhower told Nixon that the United States must not show any signs of weakness at this "critical" junction. America must not let the Soviets or Communist Chinese think that the United States will not resist if they attempt to increase their

support for the Vietminh or if they become actively involved in the conflict in Indochina or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world.²⁴³

Eisenhower, as mentioned before by Richard Immerman, also knew he faced a great deal of popular repercussions if he ordered the military to conduct any unilateral United States actions, such as those advocated in Operation Vulture. Although there is no record stating that Eisenhower asked the vice-president to modify his tone regarding U.S. intervention in Indochina, Nixon backed away from his comments in later speeches in Ohio and Iowa. He stated that the administration's policy "was to avoid sending our boys to Indochina or anywhere else to fight." And Eisenhower himself reaffirmed his policy of no American military action in Indochina during a April 29 news conference, stating, "there is no plausible reason for the U.S. to intervene."²⁴⁴

There was another series of events in April that was definitely influenced the domestic affairs of the country and probably affected how Eisenhower acted in Indochina. Ever since the unexpected reelection of President Truman in 1948, the Republican party had looked for a way to regain prominence in foreign affairs and recapture the White House. One way was to accuse the Democratic party of being "soft on communism." Why else would the communists have been able to seize control in mainland China, or the Soviet Union been

able to explode an atomic bomb five to ten years ahead of even the most conservative predictions, all in 1949? Or what would have encouraged the North Koreans to have been so bold as to cross the 38th parallel and invade the South? Obviously, it was because members of the international communist movement had gained high positions in the Truman administration. One elected official had called the current administration a "bastion of communists and queers," consisting of "egg-sucking liberals" who had "sold China into atheistic slavery." Those words had marked the beginning of a relentless attack by the Republican "Asia-firsters" on Truman's policies at the end of the 1940s.²⁴⁵

The Republican who had issued the verbal assaults and whose name had become synonymous with seeking out those American traitors was Senator Joseph McCarthy. On February 9, 1950 the junior statesman from Wisconsin had told a meeting of the Women's Republican Club of Wheeling, West Virginia that "I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of individuals who would appear to be either card carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy." That list had grown to 205 names in the next few days, and then had shrunk back to 85 persons. McCarthy's statements had generated a lot of popular support from Americans who believed, according to Stephen Ambrose, that everyone wanted to emulate the American example of life, in order to

duplicate its prosperity and its goodwill. The senator continued his anti-communism tirade for four years before getting derailed in the summer of 1954.²⁴⁶

Eisenhower, for the most part, had tried to keep his distance from the senator's witch-hunt. When McCarthy delivered that first speech in West Virginia, Eisenhower was serving in Europe as the first supreme allied commander of NATO forces. Some historians, including Blanche Wiesen Cook, believed that Eisenhower accepted McCarthy's premise (which he probably did) and therefore, refused to accept the senator's tactics. But another author, Ellen Schrecker, wrote that Eisenhower personally despised the junior senator from Wisconsin. The only reason the future president had tolerated McCarthy at any time was to keep unity within the Republican party.²⁴⁷

The one attack by McCarthy that affected Eisenhower personally, though, was his assault on Army Chief-of-Staff and later Secretary of State and Defense George C. Marshall. General Marshall had been the one who nominated Eisenhower to President Roosevelt as his choice for the person to orchestrate the D-Day invasion in 1944. The two men had been friends for years, but it is an indisputable fact that, for political purposes, in 1952, Eisenhower had removed a paragraph from a campaign speech that defended his long-time compatriot. Maybe Eisenhower had thought that if he could ignore the issue of McCarthyism, the senator might stop his

attacks when a Republican occupied the White House. Unfortunately for Eisenhower, that did not happen. In fact, the problem had only worsened as McCarthy turned his focus on the new administration.²⁴⁸

During the month that Eisenhower had sent Dulles to Europe to gain British support for United Action, the President faced a domestic challenge from the senator from Wisconsin. McCarthy had accused Eisenhower of being "soft on communism" and began looking for subversives in the new administration. His focus had concentrated on operatives in the Department of the Army, including issues concerning the loyalty of Secretary of the Army Robert T. Stevens. The administration had fought back, accusing the young senator of trying to gain special treatment in the Army for one of the members of his staff. The situation came to a climax at the end of April with the now famous Army-McCarthy trial. This trial grew in popularity because it was carried live on the new medium of television. The hearing ended in June, a month after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, and although the Senate later censured McCarthy for his lack of respect, the issue of being "soft on communism" was one Eisenhower had to face constantly, lest another McCarthy be waiting in the wings.²⁴⁹

On the same day as Nixon's remarks (April 16), the consul at Hanoi wrote that Navarre had supreme confidence in his troops at Dien Bien Phu to repulse a third or fourth

Vietminh attack. The French general did not believe that another assault would occur before the start of the Geneva conference. He understood that a military victory by the Vietminh would have a devastating effect for the French at the upcoming caucus. But he felt that a defeat would be too embarrassing for the enemy to take such a risk. Navarre would be correct about the prominence a military victory held at the diplomatic gathering.²⁵⁰

Dulles confidently believed that he had reached an agreement with these two allies for acceptance of his United Action proposal. The British soon dashed his optimism. Some historians believe that Nixon's comments scared the British. Was the U.S. really considering intervening in Indochina so close to the start of the Geneva conference? For whatever reason, on April 25, they issued a statement saying "We are not prepared to give any undertakings, now, in advance of Geneva, concerning United Kingdom military action in Indo-China." In essence, they hoped that the warring parties in Indochina could reach a cease-fire agreement at the upcoming caucus. The British did not accept Eisenhower's domino theory. Churchill, himself, commented "What we are being asked to do . . . might well bring the world to the verge of a major war." He would not agree to shed British blood to preserve France's Indochina after Britain had already lost control of India.²⁵¹

Dulles had not let the United Kingdom refrain from

supporting United Action without a fight. British Foreign Minister Eden had also been in Paris for the NATO meetings on April 22-23. Although the agenda called for a discussion about Europe, the real topic had been Indochina. For two days, the Secretary of State had joined forces with Admiral Radford in a getting verbal agreement from the Briton for United Action. They warned him that without American and British support, the French fort was doomed to be lost. Radford even flew to London to confront both the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister. All, however, went for naught. Eden flew to Geneva on April 24 and relayed to Dulles that any sort of action in Indochina at this point would be "a great mistake" in terms of world opinion. That evening, Dulles cabled to Washington the disappointing news. And as mentioned above, on the next day, the Churchill government formally announced their position.²⁵²

Eisenhower believed that, despite England's position on the matter, Australia and New Zealand still held interest in the United Action proposal. Their geographic proximity to the Indochina region practically necessitated them joining the pact. Australia could not agree to support U.S. airstrikes at Dien Bien Phu because it felt such actions might hurt the "Western" position at Geneva, as well as hurt Australia in world opinion, particularly in Asia. But despite their dissent on this particular matter, Eisenhower regarded that the membership of Australia and New Zealand,

as well as Thailand and the Philippines, was "indispensable." Accounting for all of these diplomatic problems, the United States headed to Geneva without European support for United Action and with a deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia.²⁵³

The President met with Republican Congressional leaders on April 26, 1954, two days before the scheduled start of the Geneva conference. The Chief Executive hoped to convince the members of his political party of the importance of the formation of a regional defense pact for Southeast Asia. Eisenhower remarked how the French fighters were "weary as hell," and he did not believe that they could hold out for more than one week. He mentioned that the fight at Dien Bien Phu demonstrated how critical it was for the United States to avoid "any implication of colonialism as well as any implication that the United States would carry alone the burden of defense of the free world." He did not want to send American troops to the area. Instead, U.S. forces should train the indigenous people to fight communist advancement in their countries. The establishment of a security pact would solve these problems. "We must have collective security or we'll fail. . . . Our determination to lead the free world into a voluntary association . . . would make further Communist encroachment impossible." The fate of the French, in Vietnam and at Geneva, would soon be known. And so would any hope for United Action.²⁵⁴

Chapter 8:

Dien Bien Phu Falls, Geneva Begins

The Geneva Conference started on April 28, 1954. The first matter on the agenda centered on a discussion regarding the current situation in Korea. Meanwhile, in Washington, at the NSC meeting on April 29, the discussion centered again on actions taking place in Indochina. Director Stassen, the head of the Foreign Operations Administration, said the time had arrived for the council to make a final decision concerning U.S. intervention at Dien Bien Phu. If the French fort fell and the British refused to intervene, the United States must move to secure the southern portion of Vietnam. He felt that weakness shown by the Europeans should not render American actions "inactive and impotent." A failure to act now "would not only endanger interests in Southeast Asia but the rest of the world."²⁵⁵

Eisenhower reiterated his comments that if United States troops moved into Indochina, the "Asiatic people" would merely turn their hatred on the Americans. If the United States intervenes alone in Indochina, this action might precipitate a war with China or the Soviet Union. Additionally, the United States might lose support for such actions from the rest of the "free world." He told the

Council that if he sent troops to the region, they must prepare themselves for the possibility of World War III. The President did not want to scatter American troops around the world. He had made his decision--there would be no American troops sent to Indochina.²⁵⁶

On April 30, a CIA National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report, labelled NIE 63-54, stated that the fall of Dien Bien Phu would occur soon, either by a major Vietminh offensive or by French capitulation. The Vietminh had suffered a great deal of losses from eight years of fighting. However, the French morale had also suffered a "severe blow" because of the relentless enemy barrages. The review said that the fall of Dien Bien Phu would not signal the collapse of the French military and political presence in Indochina. The French could continue to control the major cities in Vietnam, but there would most likely be a decline in the attitude of Vietnamese nationals to continue the fight. The report concluded by stating the Vietminh would make every effort to achieve political success at Geneva with a military victory at Dien Bien Phu.²⁵⁷

During this latest lull in the fighting between April 15 and May 1, General Giap ordered his Vietminh forces to dig trenches and tunnels from the foothills of the mountains surrounding the French fort to the fortress itself. The Vietminh had actually started construction of these furrows while the fighting ensued, working at night under cover of

darkness to avoid detection by French Air Force pilots. They had intensified their efforts during the lull of the hostilities. Deteriorating weather conditions in the valley had further hurt French efforts to stop the advancement. By the end of the month, the Vietminh had dug and mined a series of entrenchments to within one-half mile of the French perimeter. On April 29, at the completion of the trench-works, Giap said, "the French will soon be unable to hold out any longer under the monsoon. When they are forced to leave their flooded trenches and casements, victory will be ours." Giap believed the arrival of that victory would be only a short time in the future.²⁵⁸

General Navarre's resolve regarding the outcome of the battle also did not waver during the lull in the fighting. On April 26, he sent a dispatch to Major General Rene Cogny, commander of the French forces in the Tonkin region. General Cogny was an extremely outspoken critic of Navarre's handling of the situation at Dien Bien Phu. In the telegram, Navarre wrote that he disagreed with Cogny's belief that reinforcement of the fort should take place "only if continued resistance assure[d] a favorable outcome [for the French forces.]" Navarre believed that "military honor as well as hope . . . justifie[d] additional sacrifice" by the forces there. He, like General Giap one month earlier, cited the upcoming meeting at Geneva as an opportunity for a favorable outcome in the form of a cease-

fire or possible American intervention. And he concluded the cable writing, "Am therefore determined to prolong resistance of Dienbienphu as long as possible."²⁵⁹

The Vietminh began their final assault on what remained of the French garrison on May 1, 1954. They began the day with a celebration of May Day or the Labor Day of International Socialism. While communist military marches blasted from enemy loudspeakers, French observation posts watched Vietminh infantry units and gun crews move into position for a major attack. At 5 p.m., the Vietminh artillery barrage began.²⁶⁰

A seemingly endless stream of fire poured tons of explosives into the French fort. Forward French bunkers at remote French outposts simply disappeared and their occupants were mutilated in the artillery attack. After three hours, the enemy guns subsided somewhat and the Vietminh began their last major infantry assault on the bulwark. By midnight, it became clear to the inhabitants of the fortress that the rebels would not stop fighting until they had captured the entire French fortress.²⁶¹

The French positions at Dien Bien Phu began to fall. The area became transformed into what some survivors later called the "antechamber of death." The French possessed not one truck or jeep that could operate. Brigadier General de Castries, who had been promoted since the fighting began, anxiously awaited the scheduled drop of a battalion of

reserves. On the night of May 3, only one company arrived. These one hundred or so men were barely sufficient to make up for one-half of the French losses for that day. The next day, the Dien Bien Phu commander sent a message to Hanoi to Major General Rene Cogny. He wrote:

Our provisions of all kinds are at their lowest. . . . We don't have enough ammunition to stop enemy attacks or for harassing fire that must continue without pause. It appears that no effort is being made to remedy this situation. I'm told of the risk run by air crews when every man here runs infinitely greater risks. . . . I absolutely need provisions in massive quantities. . . . The quantities that have been sent to me represent only a very small portion of what I've requested. This situation cannot go on. . . . I have nothing to sustain the morale of my men who are being asked to accomplish superhuman effort.²⁶²

By May 6, the 3,000 French union troops left at the fort were "sleep-walking their way through combat." The lack of food coupled with the exhaustion of constant fighting numbed their senses. Howard Simpson, a war correspondent for the United States Information Agency, recounts that these men had developed what American veterans called the "'500-yard stare,' a bloodshot, vacant look, focused on enemy lines." And yet, despite the deteriorating circumstances, they fought on. In fact, according to Simpson, some of the most fierce fighting occurred in the last forty-eight hours of the Vietminh offensive. On May 6, the small band of French hold-outs watched the last reinforcements parachute their way towards the besieged citadel.²⁶³

American forces only suffered three casualties during

the siege of Dien Bien Phu. All of them belonged to the Civil Air Transport (CAT) Corporation, a civilian flying organization under contract with the Central Intelligence Agency. This association, an off-shoot of General Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers of the 1940s, had been assisting the French since the middle of March. Eisenhower's Special Committee on Indochina had recommended augmenting the exhaustive French supply effort with these aircrews. These American pilots flew C-119 transports out of the Cat Bi airfield in Haiphong as part of Operation SQUAW II.²⁶⁴

On April 24, Vietminh anti-aircraft artillery wounded Paul Holden during a resupply flight. Unable to control his aircraft, his co-pilot, Wallace Buford, completed the drop and recovered the aircraft in Haiphong. Holden was immediately evacuated to a United States Air Force hospital at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, where he recovered from his injuries. His fellow CAT-pilots, however, refused to fly into the "chamber-pot," the term they had given to the valley surrounding Dien Bien Phu, until the French dedicated more aircraft to flak-suppression missions. The French obliged, and the CAT pilots resumed their normal flying schedule on April 30.²⁶⁵

The other two casualties, the only American deaths during the Dien Bien Phu ordeal, occurred on May 6. Wallace Buford was again scheduled for an airdrop mission in the valley. This time, his pilot was James McGovern, flying his

forty-sixth mission since March. "Earthquake McGoon" McGovern had flown with General Chennault's American Volunteer Group in China during World War II. After his discharge for active duty, he had joined CAT in April, 1947. His supervisor had wrote of him, "he has won the respect of his fellow pilots and the management from his willingness to do anything reasonable even though dangerous if it is in the line of duty." In December, 1949, during the Chinese civil war, he was taken prisoner by the communists after crash landing his C-46 in the Kwangsi Province. Five months later, the Chinese, without warning, had mysteriously released him. McGovern had begun flying in Indochina in the fall of 1951. After a year's absence for personal reasons, he had returned to Southeast Asia earlier that year.²⁶⁶

On this day, their orders instructed them to drop six tons of ammunition at the Isabelle outpost. As the American C-119 entered the drop zone, a thirty-seven millimeter antiaircraft artillery shell knocked out the plane's left engine. A second blast shattered the leading edge of one of the wings. Steve Kusak, a fellow CAT pilot who also flew that day, directed McGovern to a winding river, when he might try a belly landing. The gorge proved to be too narrow, and the C-119 dug into the side of the riverbank. McGovern radioed to Kusak: "Looks like this is it, son." The plane flipped over twice and made a gigantic explosion, instantly killing both crewmembers. On May 8, the New York

Times reported, "With Mr. McGovern's death, something of a legend came to an end." Aware of the anguish felt by the other American pilots, the French did not ask CAT to fly any missions the next day.²⁶⁷

On May 7, the United States Charge' at Saigon related the news about the fall of the French fort. Vice President Nixon remembered the relief felt among the President's advisors that the situation had ended without a major war. But, "we knew the French would . . . withdraw and that America would either have to take over the burden of stopping communist aggression in Indochina or abandon the whole region." President Eisenhower sent a letter to the President of France, Rene Coty, commending the valor displayed by the French soldiers and how the free world owed them a debt of gratitude because of their "heroism and stamina." President Coty relayed his thanks to Eisenhower on behalf of the men of the French Expeditionary Corps.²⁶⁸

While the West was mourning the loss of the French fortress, obviously the Vietminh and their leaders were celebrating their victory. Ho Chi Minh's speech was filled with modesty but solid determinism. He commended the Vietnamese soldiers and supporters for their great accomplishment. But they must be modest in their victory. They must not underestimate the ability of the French to continue the fight elsewhere in Indochina, and they must be ready to do whatever the government asked of them. General

Giap's was more proud. He said the victory at Dien Bien Phu was the most "prestigious which our Army has ever achieved." The Vietminh had forced the Navarre plan to fail, and stopped the imperialistic intentions of the French colonialists and their American counterparts. The victory occurred because of the heroism and courage of the combatants and the porters. There was no reason why the Vietminh could not achieve diplomatic victory, as well, at the conference in Switzerland.²⁶⁹

On May 8, the discussion at Geneva turned to the crisis in Indochina. However, Secretary Dulles did not stay in Europe for this portion of the conference. He had returned home after only one week of diplomatic negotiations regarding Korea. In his place, Undersecretary Walter Bedell Smith headed the American delegation. During a nationally televised address on May 7, the Secretary described what position the United States position hoped to take at the Geneva Conference.

We have conferred with representatives of nine free nations having immediate interest in [Southeast Asia.] I feel confident that unity of purpose persists and that such a tragic event as the fall of Dien Bien Phu will harden, not weaken, our purpose to stay united. . . . We are gravely concerned if an armistice or cease-fire were reached at Geneva which would provide a Communist takeover. If that occurs, then the need will be even more urgent to create the conditions for united action in defense of that area.²⁷⁰

Dulles concluded his speech with an allusion to the United States being the first country to win its independence in "modern history." He then reiterated American policy

regarding a dislike of colonial empires and said that the United States "finds even more intolerable the new imperial colonialism of Communism." Once again, the issues of colonialism and communism greatly influenced American policy towards Indochina.²⁷¹

From the start of the meeting, the French and Vietnamese sought different goals in Indochina. The French desired to have divisions established for the regrouping of the respective armies and a disarmament of those factions which did not belong to any army or police force. The Vietminh wanted complete diplomatic recognition by France of the independence of Vietnam, the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the region, and general elections to form one government for their country.²⁷²

Secretary Dulles instructed Undersecretary Bedell Smith on the American position at the meeting. This involved the United States playing the role of an "interested nation . . . neither a belligerent nor a principal in the negotiation." Dulles ordered Smith not to give his approval to "any cease-fire, armistice, or other settlement which would have the effect of subverting the existing lawful government [of Vietnam]." Dulles reiterated the United States goal at a news conference on June 21 when he said that "the United States has no intention of dealing with the Indochina situation unilaterally." In support of this political objective, the JCS sent a memorandum to Secretary of Defense

Charles Wilson stating "Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than a token U.S. armed force."²⁷³

Prior to the start of the Indochina phase of the conference, the President had told reporters that plans were proceeding for "the realization of a Southeast Asia security arrangement." The United States had to modify its plans for multinational intervention in the actual fighting because of uncooperation from the British and waffling on the part of the French to internationalize their colonial struggle. Eisenhower extended an invitation to other Asian countries to join with the United States to accomplish such a cooperative effort similar to NATO. He concluded, saying,

There is a sense of urgency for such a pact. The fact that such an organization is in the process of formation could have a bearing on what happens at Geneva. I am convince that further progress on this matter will continue.²⁷⁴

Eisenhower's prophesy about the impact of the security pact on the Geneva talks proved to be true.

A Gallup poll taken on May 17, ten days after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, showed exactly how Americans felt about the military significance of Indochina. When asked, "Would you approve or disapprove of sending United States' soldiers to take part in the fighting there," only 26 percent answered in the affirmative. When the pollsters modified the question to limit the military action in the region to ~~only~~ naval and air forces ~~and no ground forces~~, the

affirmative response rose to 36 percent. In a poll commissioned by the State Department at the same time, 69 percent of the Americans questioned favored U.S. military action in the region as part of a collective effort. The disparity between the responses reflected the willingness of Americans to send troops to Vietnam only in a unified effort. Eisenhower and Dulles kept this public sentiment in mind during the negotiations at Geneva.²⁷⁵

British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden and Soviet Foreign Minister V. Molotov were the co-chairmen for the convention. Trying to find middle ground between the two warring parties, Eden hoped to include three stipulations in the final accords. First, he hoped to guarantee the neutrality of Laos and Cambodia and extend the same opportunity to a divided Vietnam. Secondly, he wanted to keep the membership at the conference limited only to the countries with vested interests in the area. Finally, he wished to establish a commission to oversee enforcement of the agreed-to principles. This commission should include countries with varying political backgrounds but capable of reaching some common ground. Eden tried diligently in open meetings and private discussions to obtain these goals, believing that they might lead to a cessation of hostilities in the region.²⁷⁶

The Geneva Conference continued for over two months as each side tried to gain the diplomatic advantage. A major

stumbling block in the negotiations was over a partition plan for Vietnam. Molotov and Eden were both receptive to such a condition. The United States, however, did not like the thought of "abandoning" part of Vietnam to the communists. Chou En-lai, Premier of Communist China, persuaded the Vietminh to abandon efforts to draw the dividing line at the 13th parallel. The French, on the other hand, wanted to place the demilitarized zone at the 18th parallel. Molotov finally got all parties to concur to a division at the 17th parallel. Reluctantly, Secretary Dulles also agreed to the line, but in return, got concessions from France and Britain for a security agreement for the region.²⁷⁷

The attendees at the conference also had to work out a solution regarding how to impose a cease-fire in the region. Differing ideas on the terms of the truce stalled the conference for several weeks. The United States did not want a cease-fire without the combatants first reaching some sort of truce on the battlefield. The French were more amenable to a negotiated settlement. The Vietnamese communists also wanted to make great political strides at the conference table in regards to the truce. All the while, the Vietminh continued offensives in the Tonkin region of Northwest Vietnam. The Geneva conference delegates eventually worked out a compromise which was included in the Final Declaration from the conference.²⁷⁸

While the conference was proceeding, an interesting phenomenon occurred in France. On June 12, the French government of Joseph Laniel lost a vote of no-confidence. This event was not unexpected, both in France and the United States. Eight days later, Pierre Mendes-France, a member of the French Radical Socialist party, became the new Premier and promised to resolve the Indochina crisis by July 20. (He would miss his target-date by one day. Whereas negotiators worked well into the night on July 20 to reach a solution to the problem, the official date on the Final Resolution of the Geneva conference was July 21, 1954. Mendes-France nonetheless retained his position in France.)

Because Mendes-France was a member of a left-wing political party, initially the Americans feared that the situation in Geneva and Indochina had just worsened. But, as it turns out, Mendes-France became very instrumental in reaching agreements with the United States, Britain, and the communists to facilitate the end of the solution. Alexander Makinsky, an analysts who worked with C.D. Jackson, one of Eisenhower's closest advisors, wrote that he considered the Mendes-France cabinet as America's "safest bet" in Europe. "Only a statesman with a 'left-wing' reputation can succeed in selling a 'right-wing' policy [regarding Indochina and the EDC] to French political circles and public opinion." Makinsky's predictions proved to be correct about Indochina but false regarding the EDC.²⁷⁹

The United States, although never admitting to being an official participant to the Indochina portion of the conference, affected the proceedings by its conspicuous absence. Secretary Dulles decided that it was in the best interest of his plans for United Action to boycott most of the meeting. Unfortunately, for England and France, this action damaged any chances of a united "western" stance against the communists. The Secretary believed that he foresaw "western capitulation to the communists" and he did not want to be a part of it. Even Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith returned to Washington in May. Through the persuasion of Eden and Eisenhower's close friend Winston Churchill as well as the discussion of Mendes-France and Dulles in Paris during the beginning part of July, the President directed Bedell Smith to return to the Geneva conference on July 16.²⁸⁰

The delegates to Geneva concluded their meeting on July 21. The Geneva Agreements included three cease-fire agreements, several other unilateral declarations by the participants, and The Final Declaration of the Conference. The resolution called for a "temporary" division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, stipulated that nationwide elections should occur in two years, forbade the importation of foreign weapons into either part of Vietnam, and allowed the free movement of people between the two sections. Additionally, an International Control Commission, comprised

of equal numbers of representatives from India, Canada, and Poland, was tasked with overseeing the implementation of the accords. None of the countries participating at the convention, however, signed the final declaration.²⁸¹

Historian David Anderson wrote, "Like the Versailles Conference after World War I, the Geneva Conference marked the end of one war but sowed the seed for a second and more devastating conflict." Like Woodrow Wilson in 1919, the first American president to meet Ho Chi Minh, Dwight Eisenhower believed that "misguided ideologies and selfish ambitions of those who initiated the fighting had produced an unnecessary tragedy." Secretary Dulles likened Geneva to Munich in 1938 where the British and French made great concessions to Nazi Germany, and to Yalta in 1945 where Roosevelt and Churchill had acted in a similar manner with Soviet Marshall Joseph Stalin.

Because of the inability of the participants to reach an agreeable permanent solution for the crisis, unrest in the region remained high. The elections scheduled for July 1956 never took place and the 17th parallel became a permanent political boundary. Many of the participants at Geneva, including British Foreign Minister Eden believed that the idea of free elections so soon after eight years of military conflict was not possible. He later asserted that "[t]en years, or preferably fifteen, should be allowed to pass before South and North Vietnam are asked to decide upon

unity or otherwise with each other." Many likely felt that the free-election stipulation hid the incompatibility of the Western and communist positions and disguised the "true nature" of the 17th parallel. The United States position on the outcome of the Geneva conference will be discussed in the next chapter. Despite the possible veiled optimism of the Geneva delegates, two distinct Vietnamese countries emerged, and any hope of early unification by means of free elections faded.²⁸²

As mentioned previously, the United States issued a unilateral declaration at the closing session of the conference that accompanied the final Geneva accords. President Eisenhower had previously announced that the United States had not been a party to the conference, and therefore was not bound by the accords. In keeping in line with this policy, Undersecretary Smith said the United States would honor the cessation of hostilities between the Vietminh and the French Expeditionary Forces in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. He commented that the United States would "refrain from the threat or use of force" to disturb the agreements, and any renewed aggression that violated the accords "with grave concern." And he concluded that the United States hoped "the agreements will permit Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to play their part . . . in the peaceful community of nations." Clearly, this last statement was an indication of future U.S. actions in the region.²⁸³

Chapter 9:
The Formation of SEATO

During a press conference on the day that the Geneva conference ended, a reporter asked President Eisenhower how he felt about the outcome of the meetings. Eisenhower and Dulles knew that any move resembling a concession to unification of Vietnam under the communist government of Ho Chi Minh would have the same domestic political repercussions as the "loss of China" debate that had plagued the previous administration. Large segments of the public as well as the Congress remained firm in their opposition to any semblance of more communist expansionism in Asia. For these reasons, Eisenhower reiterated to the journalists his position that since the United States had not been an active party to the decisions of the conference, it did not feel bound by the resolution. However, the President hoped that the Geneva accords might "lead to the establishment of peace consistent with the rights and needs of the countries concerned."²⁸⁴

Eisenhower continued that the agreement contained some features which the United States did not like, but a lot depended on how these provisions worked in practice. He informed the press about the United States unilateral statement. And he concluded saying that several free

nations were working together for the organization of a collective defense pact in Southeast Asia to prevent further communist aggression into the region. One reporter asked him if the Geneva conference accords were another form of appeasement like in the Munich conference in 1938. Eisenhower responded that although the deal was not satisfactory to his administration, he would not criticize it too much since there was no better deal to implement "right now." However, as mentioned earlier, the allies were trying to change that situation. The United Action plan for possible multi-national intervention at Dien Bien Phu was transforming into a collective security defense pact for the entire region.²⁸⁵

The CIA forwarded another National Intelligence Estimate, identified as NIE 63-5-54, to the National Security Council on August 3, 1954 describing the "post-Geneva outlook" for the region. The report believed that the Vietminh would continue to build their armed forces in North Vietnam. And they would increase their subversive activities in South Vietnam. Their goal would be to collapse any non-communist efforts below the 17th parallel. A strong possibility existed that the political climate in the south would deteriorate and the communists would win the 1956 elections. The likelihood that Ho Chi Minh, a communist, would be in control of all of Vietnam, did not please the Eisenhower administration in the least. The

report concluded with a prediction that the development of a situation in Vietnam favorable to the interests of the United States was "unlikely."²⁸⁶

Even during the Geneva conference, the Eisenhower administration was looking for an alternative solution which would prevent French colonialism from being replaced by "communist colonialism." The President needed a way to keep the communists from overpowering the nationalist forces which did not submit to rule by Ho Chi Minh. A defense pact along the lines of the previously-purposed United Action plan would solve this paradox. He wanted a reasonable and attainable solution that was fluid enough to meet the changing problems in the area. In the end, Dulles convinced the Western European allies to join in a defense for the entire Southeast Asian region.²⁸⁷

Negotiations for the formation of such a collective security defense treaty began in the middle of June 1954, simply more than one month after the Indochina portion of the Geneva conference had started. In a letter to the British Prime Minister dated June 18, President Eisenhower asked if Premier Mendes-France was serious about his pledge to end the Geneva conference in one month or he would resign. Churchill responded that he felt Mendes-France hoped to get the French presence out of Indochina on the best terms possible. Then, as if trying to resurrect the United Action plan, Churchill reversed his former policy

about not wishing to become involved in an alliance for that area. He suggested the formation of a Southeast Asian Treaty Organization or SEATO to "establish a firm front against Communism in the Pacific sphere." The SEATO front "should be considered as a whole" for the area. No British troops would be sent directly to Indochina. The United States could protect that area while the British concentrated on protecting their interests in Hong Kong and Malaya.²⁸⁸

Foreign Minister Eden, during a recess from the Geneva meetings, joined Prime Minister Churchill in a visit to Washington at the end of June. The purpose of Anglo-American meeting was to discuss the current situation in Guatemala. The British Prime Minister received a warm welcome from his long-time friend, President Eisenhower. But a great deal of stress regarding the current state of affairs in South America existed between the Foreign Minister and the Secretary of State. Eden's welcome by Dulles was much cooler. After a couple of days of discussion on several international matters, the four decided that they would press forward with the plans for a collective defense treaty in Southeast Asia regardless of the outcome in Geneva. They agreed to establish a study group for the region, and decided that the group should hold a series of meetings in Washington in the beginning of July. This group's task would be to work on the framework for a

charter for the defense pact.²⁸⁹

The Anglo-American plans were further corroborated by a communique from French Prime Minister Mendes-France on June 26. The French leader offered the United States the chance "to save in Indochina all that can possibly be saved." In other words, Mendes-France offered America the opportunity to become more involved in the affairs of "the state of Vietnam" and the surrounding region. The chances for the formation of the pact were growing, having now received endorsement from both the British and the French. United Action was changing from a plan for multi-lateral intervention at Dien Bien Phu to a multi-national pact that would threaten action should communist aggression into Asia continue.²⁹⁰

In a joint statement between Eisenhower and Churchill dated June 28, the two leaders publicly announced that their two nations were moving forward with their plans for a defense treaty in Southeast Asia. The next day, prior to the departure of the Britons, the two leaders issued a joint declaration. The announcement, termed by some as the Atlantic Charter #2 or the Potomac Charter, stated that

- 1) We will continue our united efforts to secure world peace based on the principles of the Atlantic Charter . . . ;
- 3) We uphold the principle of self-government and will earnestly strive to secure the independence of all countries whose peoples desire and are capable of sustaining an independent existence . . . ;
- 5) We will continue our support of the United Nations and of international organizations that have been established for common protection and security.

We urge the establishment and maintenance of such organizations of appropriate nations as will best, in their respective regions, preserve the peace and independence of the people living there.²⁹¹

(emphasis added)

The transformation of United Action, a plan for intervention, into SEATO, a pact for collective security, was well on its way. And in the containment principles of this revised plan, this pact also had roots in anti-colonial rhetoric of the Atlantic Charter, striving to preserve the rights of self-determination for those nations that were ready for and capable of the responsibility of self-rule.

The joint study group for the creation of the pact met six times in July. Its members agreed with most of the provisions of the collective security of the organization. One of the stumbling blocks that had to be resolved centered on which countries would be asked to become members. The British wanted to include the Colombo Pact nations. These included the Commonwealth governments of India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon, and Indonesia. The Americans, however, wanting to form the pact quickly after the conclusion of the Geneva conference, desired to exclude those nations. The reason for this centered around the questionable loyalties and political leanings of some of Colombo countries, especially India. Despite its declared neutrality, many American military officials feared that India would cause more havoc than good for the group. In the end, India chose not to participate in SEATO. Only Pakistan asked to

join.²⁹²

In addition to excluding the Colombo nations, the joint study group also decided not to extend the umbrella of protection to include Japan, Nationalist China on Taiwan, and the Republic of South Korea. The negotiators then had to consider the question of whether the kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia could be included in the security arrangement. Also, they wondered if Vietnam, whether divided or unified, could join the pact after the Geneva conference. Not wanting to upset the proceedings in Switzerland, the British and American diplomats decided that their treaty organization could still give these three countries protection against external communist aggression and assistance against internal communist infiltration without formally including them in the treaty.²⁹³

Relations between the leaders of the two principle partners in SEATO remained optimistic during the study group discussions. In a letter dated July 9, Churchill reiterated his resolve to develop the organization. Three days later, Eisenhower responded saying that Dulles told him talks for SEATO were moving forward "in good spirit and at good speed." He then commented that something needed to be accomplished quickly to stop the continuing spread of communism into the region because "the French position is crumbling alarmingly." Both leaders truly believed that SEATO would stop that aggression, thereby making the domino

theory inoperative.²⁹⁴

At the National Security Council meeting on July 22, 1954, one day after the conclusion of the Geneva accords, Secretary Dulles formally revealed to the other NSC members that the State Department had been working with British envoys to establish a collective treaty organization in Southeast Asia. He expected formal talks with the countries concerned to begin by the end of August. The location for the meeting was still undetermined. National Security Advisor Robert Cutler asked if there was a possibility to include other "free Asian" nations in the pact so it wouldn't appear as another "white man's group." Dulles said that he wanted to first establish a small group that was military in nature and could deter Communist Chinese aggression further into the region. This would only include a few Asian nations. Later, the organization could be opened to a larger group of Asian states for economic development. Although reactions to Dulles' announcement were mixed, Eisenhower reiterated his support for the plan.²⁹⁵

The next day, Secretary Dulles described his plan for the remainder of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Radford stated that from a military point of view, a Southeast Asia defense pact seemed "undesirable and unwise." It would lead the countries included in this area to think they were protected against internal subversion and external

aggression, but, in fact, they will not be since the United States did not have the military resources to spread out all around the world. Additionally, Radford did not want Formosa, Japan, or South Korea to feel left out of the organization. The rest of the Joint Chiefs agreed with the Chairman. General Ridgway said that the State Department should take a hard look at the idea of the defense pact and make sure "we aren't making a mistake." And General Twining remarked that American troops should not be used to stop aggression in Southeast Asia. This would not be the last time the departments of defense and state disagreed on the formation of SEATO.²⁹⁶

Secretary Dulles, Admiral Radford, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, Vice President Nixon, NSC Advisor Cutler, and Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles met one day later, on July 24, to again discuss the American position on the defense organization. Also included in this group was General-of-the-Army Douglas MacArthur II, who, because of his extensive knowledge of the area, was asked to be involved in the formation of the pact. Secretary Dulles said that it was in the best interests of the nation to move quickly on this issue. He wanted to "draw a line" which, if crossed by the communists, would allow the United States to retaliate and do so with the support of other nations with interests in the area. Secretary Wilson asked where the line would be drawn. Dulles responded that it would be in

Laos, Cambodia, and the southern half of Vietnam. Had the British agreed to this? The Secretary of State answered that they had, and that it was agreed to by both President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Churchill. Members of the defense department, however, were still not completely convinced about this idea. They feared that a treaty similar to NATO would lead other nations to ask for increased military assistance and the stationing of a large amount of U.S. troops. These requests would soon be greater than present U.S. military capabilities could handle.²⁹⁷

These differences of opinion again surfaced at the National Security Council meeting on August 12. This time, Secretary Wilson expressed his fear of "backing into a war" in Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam. Secretary Dulles responded that the former Associated States would be "beneficiaries" of this new pact but the United States would not have to commit troops there for local defense. He continued by saying that the pact, though, would include these three countries "on our side." Wilson then made a comment that would affect United States relations with this area for the next twenty years. He believed that it would be difficult to include Laos, Cambodia, or Vietnam "on our side" because their loss, no matter how tragic, would not be a loss for America since they never belonged to the United States in the first place. To this, Dulles answered that any loss to communist aggression wherever it occurred in the world was,

in effect, a loss for the United States. Eisenhower emphatically agreed to this last statement.²⁹⁸

At this same meeting, the council adopted NSC 5429 entitled "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East." The document began with a review of the outcome of the Geneva conference. It stated that the communists had achieved a foot-hold in the region from which they could launch attacks into the surrounding nations. The United States had lost some prestige in the region by backing the French and had to regain its position to protect its interests. One way to accomplish this was the organization of a defense organization. The United States should make "every effort possible" to defeat communist subversion and infiltration in Southeast Asia. Additionally, it should assist Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam to maintain security forces necessary for internal security. Finally, it should "exploit available means" to stop northern Vietnam from becoming a satellite in the Soviet sphere of influence. With the adoption of this paper, the United States was now firmly entrenched in the affairs of Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam.²⁹⁹

On August 14, 1954, the State Department publicly issued an statement that the government of the United States had agreed "with [other] like-minded governments" that the situation in Southeast Asia called for the immediate establishment of a collective security arrangement. The

objective of this pact was to "strengthen the fabric of peace in the area of Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific." The government of the Philippines had offered the facilities for the meeting of the included foreign ministers. They would convene in Manila on September 6 to formalize these plans. Similar announcements were made in Australia, France, Britain, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand.³⁰⁰

Despite his outward support for the formalization of the security pact, John Foster Dulles was not entirely committed to the organization. After a meeting with Eisenhower on August 17, Secretary Dulles wrote a personal memo about his feelings.

I expressed my concern with reference to the projected SEA Treaty on the grounds that it involved committing the prestige of the U.S. in an area where we had little control and where the situation was by no means promising. On the other hand, I said that failure to go ahead would mark a total abandonment of the area without a struggle. I thought that to make the treaty include Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam was the lesser of two evils, but would involve a real risk of results which would hurt the prestige of the U.S. in this area. Ike [said] we should go ahead.³⁰¹

On the same day as Dulles' diary entry, Wilson sent a memo his compatriot Dulles expressing similar sentiments. The Secretary of Defense said he had a minimum amount of optimism about what the involved nations could really accomplish at this point. The Secretary of State wrote Wilson back saying that he also had a small amount of optimism about what might be concluded for this region.

But, he believed that something had to be done. Otherwise the free nations would abandon the region without a struggle. For the first time in discussion on this issues, the state and defense departments found common ground. It is too bad that it centered on negative feelings about U.S. involvement in the area.³⁰²

On September 6, representatives from Australia, France, England, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States met in Manila. Prior to this meeting, General MacArthur had received inputs from all the involved nations trying to make changes to the draft agreement that had been issued one month earlier. In the three days of negotiations, these eight representatives hashed out their differences in the philosophy as well as the rhetoric of the treaty and eventually formed the Southeast Asia Collective Treaty Organization (SEATO). Armistice agreements associated with the Geneva accords prohibited the incorporation of "South" Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia in SEATO. The foreign ministers agreed to act together to stop an aggressor in the general area of Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific region if the threatened state agreed to such action on its soil.³⁰³

A recast United Action plan had become official United States policy. Instead of intervening in a battle, as was the intent of the original version prior to May 7, the plan was now a diplomatic and military pact to thwart further

aggression. In his remarks at the closing session of the SEATO conference, the U.S. Secretary of State said "this treaty will, we hope, serve to deter any aggression [in Indochina.]" Although communist infiltration into the South resumed in 1956, following the cancellation of the planned elections, and later intensified with the formation of the Viet Cong, SEATO deterred open communist movement southward for almost ten years. Additionally, the Manila pact was regarded as another stage in Eisenhower's grand strategy to develop a comprehensive global order of regional defense arrangements against the monolithic spread of communism into all parts of the world. On November 10, 1954, the President confidently told Congress that the treaty "constitutes an important link in the collective security of the free nations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific [and the world.]" Dien Bien Phu may have been lost to the Vietminh, but no further land would be surrendered to the communists.³⁰⁴

Chapter 10:

The French Leave, The Americans Arrive

The French started to pull their troops out of Indochina at the end of 1954. They left Premier Ngo Dinh Diem with a military force of 250,000 indigenous troops. Diem used this corps to expel Vietminh supporters in the south. Eisenhower saw no immediate need to send U.S. troops to replace the withdrawing European detachment, as long as the Vietminh refrained from open advancement into the south. Michael Guhin writes:

There appeared no designed hurry to jump into the situation [in Indochina] less the administration be confronted with the choice of either sending in ground troops to avoid a failure, which Eisenhower opposed doing, or accepting a failure which would reflect higher on United States prestige and power.³⁰⁵

Though now officially linked to the region because of SEATO, America did not witness an immediate increase of U.S. forces in the region. In fact, the number of troops sent to Southeast Asia remained minimal for the remainder of the decade. In a deleted excerpt from his memoirs *Mandate for Change*, Eisenhower revealed his unhappiness with the outcome of the battle at Dien Bien Phu:

It is exasperating and depressing to stand by and watch a free world nation losing a battle to slavery without being able to commit all your resources, including combat troops, to its aid. . . . The conditions which prevented American intervention with military force on behalf of the French Union were surely frustrating to me.³⁰⁶

Yet Eisenhower, a former commander of NATO, knew that military force alone would not produce a favorable outcome for the United States. He understood the colonial aspect of the war. He knew that the Vietnamese had been fighting a long time to achieve their independence. They had endured seventy years of French oppression, ever since the middle of the nineteenth century. They had hardened convictions about their aspirations for eventual self-government. They would show no less resentment to American soldiers than they did to the French. In another deleted passage, Eisenhower described this concept:

The jungles of Indochina . . . would have swallowed up division after division of United States troops, who, unaccustomed to this kind of warfare, would have sustained heavy casualties. . . . Furthermore, the presence of ever more numbers of white men in uniform probably would have aggravated rather than assuaged Asiatic resentment.³⁰⁷

Eisenhower deleted this passage because, by the time he published his memoirs in 1964, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was growing steadily and he did not wish to be critical of Johnson's actions.

Eisenhower desired unquestionably to stop the communist aggression into Indochina. But he did not want to see American troops get bogged down in another military conflict in Asia so soon after they had just returned from Korea. The casualty figures from that "police action" cost the United States over 40,000 dead, 95,400 wounded and another 4,400 who spent time in prisoner-of-war camps. Eisenhower

also understood the French colonial aspirations in the region. He would not order U.S. soldiers to fight another country's colonial conflict, even if it occurred in an area of strategic, Cold War importance. Plus, the "half-hearted" method in which the French implemented the Navarre plan in 1954 reinforced other United States concerns about the depth of the French commitment to the area.³⁰⁸

Eisenhower could have opted to execute Admiral Radford's plan of using U.S. aircraft to obliterate the Vietminh positions surrounding the French fort and in other areas of Indochina. This unilateral action may have helped, but the majority of the JCS believed that the airstrikes alone could not guarantee Allied success. Bernard Fall in *Hell in a Very Small Place* concludes that "Air power on a more massive scale than as then available could not have changed the outcome of the Indochina War, but it would have saved Dien Bien Phu." If he had chosen this option, there is a very good chance that the United States would eventually have to send ground troops to ensure victory in all of Vietnam. However, by acting in such a manner, the United States would be viewed as supporting French colonialism instead of stopping the spread of communism.³⁰⁹

Eisenhower, however, would not intervene in Indochina unilaterally. He understood the influence of domestic public opinion in the formulation of foreign policy. And, as of April 4, 1954, Eisenhower told his advisors that the

United States would not get involved in the region militarily without the support of Congress as well. Therefore, the only other option available was to get allied support for a multi-national operation in the area. His approach for United Action would have saved the tremendous loss of American lives that might have occurred had Operation Vulture been undertaken and had it been followed by an allied ground campaign. But, since the British were not anxious to get involved in the fight at Dien Bien Phu prior to the start of the Geneva conference, the viability of United Action taking place was minimal.

It did not take the Western European countries long to realize that at the Geneva conference, they were going to lose at least half of Vietnam to the communists. At this point, Churchill contacted Eisenhower and posed the possibility of the formation of a multi-lateral defense pact for the region. United Action had been reborn, and its new mission was to threaten action in the region if the communists advanced any farther. This threat of combined military action served to intimidate the communists from gaining more ground in Indochina. United Action had become the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. And this pact ensured, at least rhetorically, not only that the United States would not get involved in the region unilaterally (at least that was the original intention) but also that the area would not fall to communist domination through internal

subversion or external aggression.

Officially, the United States never had to send more than the 200 mechanics to the region to fight the Vietminh. By not intervening in the battle, Eisenhower saved the excessive spilling of more American blood on Asian soil for the rest of the 1950s. This may have only delayed an inevitable conflict between United States and communist-supported Vietnamese forces. In fact, the United States continued to finance the Diem government in South Vietnam for the remainder of the decade to strengthen its position against the communist faction in the North under the direction of Ho Chi Minh. But for the time being, Eisenhower supporters could claim, "He [Eisenhower] got us out of Korean and he kept us out of Vietnam."³¹⁰

In his book *In Retrospect*, former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara recalled a memorandum that he and McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's special assistant for National Security Affairs, sent to the Commander-in-Chief on January 27, 1965. This note detailed possible U.S. courses of action regarding the deteriorating situation in Vietnam.

The worst course of action [for the U.S. in Southeast Asia] is to continue in this essentially passive role which can only lead to eventual defeat and an invitation to get out in humiliating circumstances. We see two alternatives. The first is to use our military power in the Far East and to force a change in Communist policy. The second is to deploy all our resources along a track of negotiation, aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved with no major addition to our present military risks. [We] tend to favor the first course, but we believe that both should be carefully studied.³¹¹

The first option seems to resemble the schemes found in Admiral Radford's Operation Vulture campaign. But the second course looks like what Ho Chi Minh had tried to do with the French and Americans immediately after World War II. When that avenue did not bring him any success, he resorted to the first one. It took eight long years of fighting, but the Vietminh had finally achieved independence from France, although their country had been "temporarily" split. But what about a third option--winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people?

President Johnson, according to McNamara, had defeated Barry Goldwater in the presidential election of 1964 because he promised not to escalate the war in Vietnam. But now, in 1965, he had "reached the fork in the road." Eisenhower had faced a similar situation eleven years earlier. Knowing full-well the consequences of employing the military option, he risked the consequences of not intervening at Dien Bien Phu. The French lost the fort, and the West lost the northern half of Indochina. But Eisenhower had, for the time being, kept at least part of the Vietnamese domino from falling into the communist sphere of control. Eisenhower took that risk because he understood the type of motivation of the Vietnamese during their fight with the French. According to McNamara, Johnson chose the first option, sending United States ground troops to fight against the Viet Cong despite not having a complete understanding about

the nature of the conflict in Southeast Asia.³¹²

Two concepts--colonialism and containment concerns--clashed in a small country in the southwest Pacific. Eisenhower understood both of them. He regarded the French as an important ally in the struggle against the spread of communism into both Asia and Europe. But he would not send U.S. troops to intervene in a military conflict which would preserve the French colonial empire not matter how much he wanted the French to ratify the European Defense Community. He understood that the French priorities in Indochina were the exact opposite of traditional American rhetoric of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. Woodrow Wilson expressed these ideas at the Versailles conference following the first World War. Franklin Roosevelt had reiterated them in the Atlantic Charter and in his trusteeship proposals during the second World War. Eisenhower would continue them in this conflict in Indochina. Several times he expressed this sentiment, during NSC meetings, public speeches, Congressional caucuses, and press conferences.³¹³

Apparently, according to the first quote by McNamara found in the introduction of this paper, these concepts disappeared when Lyndon Johnson became the chief executive. Of course, the French colonialists had left Vietnam several years earlier. But the Vietnamese, especially Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, still had the same nationalist drive they had during the 1950s. Johnson, however, viewed the

situation in a different light. "He saw the takeover of South Vietnam as a . . . break in our containment policy-- and he was determined to prevent it." The nationalistic aspect of the conflict had completely disappeared from the rhetoric of America's leaders. According to McNamara, the Johnson administration "totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh's movement."³¹⁴

Eisenhower understood such concepts and he knew the difficulty of fighting such a powerful force which had turned against its colonial rulers. Therefore, he sent only a few hundred Americans to the region. Therefore, he did not endorse or authorize Operation Vulture. And therefore, he chose to make a united stand in the region instead of rushing into the situation rashly and hastily.

There is one major question that remains unanswered. Let's assume that Congress did give Eisenhower his sought-after "blank check resolution" that authorized him to use discretionary force to stop the further spread of communism. And let's assume that, for whatever reason, Churchill and Eden agreed to the concepts of United Action. And finally, let's assume that the French government began serious negotiations to grant true independence to the Associated States. Would Eisenhower have then directed Admiral Radford to commence with Operation Vulture?

First of all, Congress, at least in the 1950s, would probably never give the President such free reign in sending

troops as they would give to Johnson with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. One merely has to look at the debate over stationing American soldiers in Europe as part of NATO to know that sending troops to Asia, for the second time in five years, was not going to happen. Second, Eden, being co-chairman of the Geneva conference would probably never agree to have the British get involved in an armed conflict so soon before the start of the caucus. And finally, the French had made numerous overtures to granting full independence to the Associated States before 1954, and they never fulfilled them. Therefore, all three of these requirements would probably never been met. But for arguments sake, let's assume that they were. Then, would Eisenhower have intervened at Dien Bien Phu?

Judging from the quotes presented in this paper, Eisenhower probably would not have given the order to begin bombing in Indochina. He understood what was at stake. He was as much a cold warrior as his vice-president. But, as mentioned previously, he understood the nature of the conflict. He understood all the ramifications behind fighting a battle-hardened enemy using unfamiliar tactics in poor terrain in a faraway country. He knew that the bombs would have little effect on destroying the Vietminh's capability and will to continue the fight. For these reasons, although his stipulations of April 4 would have been met, he probably would have found another way to ensure

that American military assistance continued to flow to the French, but American troops remained on U.S. soil. Whereas the issues of containment maintained prominence during the Eisenhower administration, so did the traditional American rhetoric regarding colonialism. In this case, Eisenhower found a way to keep the communists out of the southern portion of Vietnam, as well as the rest of the southwest Pacific region, without officially assisting one nation maintain its colonial domain over another.

Johnson, on the other hand, did not grasp this dilemma between colonialism and nationalism (as mentioned previously, the issue of European colonialism left with the departure of the French) and containment. His lack of understanding cost America over 58,000 of its young men and women. Unofficial estimates believe that the Vietnamese lost over 2 million military and civilian lives in their thirty-year war for independence against the French and Americans. This fact alone proves their conviction for independence and self-determination. Had the United States understood this concept, lives on both sides could have been spared.

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13. Archimedes Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) 371-372; Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (London: Studio Vista, 1973) 16; See also Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir*, trans. Herma Briffault (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, Inc., 1972) 2.

14. David Halberstam, *Ho* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1971) 26; Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 26.

15. Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh*, 16; See also Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 372.

16. Robert J. McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-1949* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981) 44; Halberstam, *Ho*, 28.

17. Duiker, *Rise of Nationalism*, 196; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991) 2-3. An interesting side-note is that Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State at Versailles was Robert Lansing. Lansing was the uncle of John Foster Dulles, who would become Secretary of State during the Eisenhower administration. Dulles, like his uncle, would also have to deal with the problem of Vietnamese nationalism versus French colonialism in Southeast Asia.

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